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Maigret takes a room

Simenon



Maigret Takes A Room

MAIGRET EN MEUBLÉ

THE 65TH EPISODE IN THE MAIGRET SAGA

1951

Georges Simenon

Translated from the French by Robert Brain

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A Helen and Kurt Wolff Book

Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.

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MAIGRET TAKES A ROOM

Chapter I



Why not come back and take pot-luck with us?”

And kindly Lucas may well have added:

“I promise you my wife would be delighted.”

Poor old Lucas! This was not the truth, since his wife was the sort to panic over trifles, for whom an extra dinner guest was a nightmare; she would certainly have taken him severely to task.

They had left the Quai des Orfèvres together about seven o'clock, while the sun was still shining brightly, made for the Brasserie Dauphine and sat down in their usual corner. They had drunk their first apéritif staring into space as people do when they have just finished their day's work. Then, hardly aware of his action, Maigret had rapped on his saucer with a coin, to call the waiter, and asked for another drink.

Unimportant things, it is true. Things which are exaggerated in being told, since, in fact, they are infinitely more subtle. Maigret, nonetheless, was convinced that Lucas had thought:

“It's because his wife's away that the chief is having another drink which he doesn't need.”

Two days before, Madame Maigret had been called away to Alsace, to the bedside of her sister who was going to have an operation.

Did Lucas suppose he was feeling a little lost? or miserable? Whatever the case, he was asking him to dinner, pressing him, despite himself, a little too affectionately. He was also looking at him in a certain fashion, as if pitying him. Or did all this only exist in the chief inspector's imagination?

It was slightly ironical that for the past two days no urgent case had kept him at the office after seven o'clock. He might even have left at six, whereas it was usually a miracle if he arrived home in time for the evening meal.

"No. I'm going to take advantage of the situation and go to the cinema," he had answered.

And he had said "take advantage of the situation" without intending it, without the phrase reflecting his thoughts.

They had parted at the Châtelet, he and Lucas, Lucas bounding down the steps to the underground, Maigret standing hesitantly in the middle of the pavement. The sky was pink. The streets had a pink look.

It was one of the first evenings with a feeling of spring, and there were people on all the terraces.

What did he feel like eating? Since he was alone and could go where he chose, he pondered the question seriously, thought of the different restaurants which might tempt him, as if he were planning a tête-à-tête meal. He took a few steps at first towards the Place de la Concorde, and it gave him a pang of conscience because he was walking unnecessarily away from home. In the window of a delicatessen he noticed some ready-cooked snails, smothered in parsley butter which gave them a glazed look.

His wife did not care for snails. He ate them only rarely. He decided to treat himself to some this evening and thus "take advantage of the situation", so he did a right-about turn and walked in the direction of a restaurant near the Bastille, where they specialized in them.

They knew him there.

"For one, Monsieur Maigret?"

The waiter looked at him with a hint of surprise, a hint of reproach. Alone, he could not expect a good table, and he was installed in a sort of passageway, with his back to a pillar.

He had not in fact promised himself anything extraordinary. It was not even true that he wanted to go to the cinema. He

didn't know what to do with his massive self. Nevertheless he felt vaguely cheated.

“And the wine?”

He did not dare choose a specially fine wine, in case he seemed to be taking advantage of the situation.

And three-quarters of an hour later, when the street-lamps were alight in the blue of the evening, he found himself standing, still alone, in the Place de la Bastille.

It was too early to go home to bed. He had found time to read the evening paper at the office. He didn't feel like starting a book which would keep him awake half the night.

He began to walk along the Grands Boulevards, determined to go to the cinema. Twice he stopped to look at the posters but they failed to excite him. A woman kept looking at him insistently and he nearly blushed, because she appeared to have guessed that he was a temporary bachelor.

Did she, like everyone else, expect him to take advantage of the situation? She passed him, turned round, and the more embarrassed he became, the more she was convinced that he was a shy customer. She actually murmured a few words as she crossed in front of him and he only got rid of her by going over to the other pavement.

There was even something reprehensible about entering a cinema alone. Ridiculous, anyway. He went into a bar and drank a Calvados. A woman there, too, gave him a come-hither smile.

Thousands of times he had stood drinking at bars and he had never felt like this before.

Finally, for the sake of his peace of mind, he chose a little basement news-cinema.

At half past ten he was hanging around outside again. He stopped at the same bar, drank another calvados, as if he were already making an established habit of it, then, filling his pipe, made his way slowly in the direction of the Boulevard Richard-Lenoir.

The whole evening, in fact, he had had the sensation of being out of place, and though he had done nothing blameworthy, there was a kind of twinge of remorse in some corner of his conscience.

He took his key from his pocket as he went upstairs, and there was no light showing under the door, no smell of cooking to greet him. He had to switch the lamps on himself. As he passed the sideboard, he decided to pour himself a drink, something he could do today without exchanging a glance with his wife.

He began to get undressed without having closed the curtains, went over to the window, and was just slipping off his braces when the telephone rang out.

In the same instant, he felt sure that some untoward event was the explanation for his feeling of discomfort all evening.

“Hello!...”

His sister-in-law had not died, for it wasn't his wife speaking, and the call came from Paris.

“That you, Chief?”

Police Headquarters, then. He recognized Torrence's deep voice, as loud as a bugle-call over the telephone.

“I'm glad you're back. It's the fourth time I've rung you. I called Lucas, who told me you'd gone to the cinema. But I didn't know which...”

Torrence, in his excitement, didn't seem to know where to start.

“It's to do with Janvier...”

Reflex action? Maigret, unconsciously, put on his gruff voice to ask:

“Well, what does Janvier want?”

“They've just taken him to Cochon. He's been shot in the chest.”

“No!”

“By now he must be on the operating slab.”

“Where are you speaking from?”

“The Quai. Someone’s got to stay here. I’ve seen to everything in the Rue Lhomond. Lucas grabbed a taxi to take him to Cochin. Likewise I’ve notified Madame Janvier, who must have got there by now too.”

“I’ll be off then.”

He was about to hang up, already hitching on his braces with one hand, when it occurred to him to ask:

“Was it Paulus?”

“We don’t know. Janvier was alone in the street. He had gone on duty there at seven. Young Lapointe was due to relieve him at seven in the morning.”

“Did you send some men into the house?”

“They’re still there. They’re keeping in touch by telephone. They haven’t found anything.”

Maigret had to walk right to the Boulevard Voltaire before he got a taxi. The Rue Saint-Jacques was almost deserted, with lights on only in a few bars. He hurried through the main entrance into Cochin, and it hit him like a blast from all the hospitals he had known in his life.

Why surround the sick, the wounded, the people they are trying to keep alive as well as those who are going to die, with so mournful, so dreary an atmosphere? Why this light, at once dim and cruel, which only occurs here and in certain administrative buildings? And why, at the very door, is one met by sour faces?

He was almost obliged to prove his identity. The house surgeon on duty looked a mere youngster and wore his cap askew, to show off.

“Block G. You’ll be shown the way...”

He was boiling with impatience. Furious with all the world, he now resented the fact that the nurse, leading him, wore lipstick and had wavy hair.

Badly lit courtyards, staircases, a long corridor, and, at the end of this corridor, three figures. The stretch between him and these figures seemed interminable, the flooring more slippery than anywhere else.

Little Lucas came a few paces to meet him, walking sidelong like a dog that's taken a beating.

"They think he'll pull through," he said straight away in a low voice. "He's been in the operating-theatre three-quarters of an hour already."

Madame Janvier, red-eyed, her hat not on straight, was looking at him as if to beseech him, as if he had some power, and suddenly she burst into tears behind her handkerchief.

He didn't know the third person present, a man with long moustaches, who kept discreetly to one side.

"He's a neighbour," Lucas explained. "Madame Janvier couldn't leave the children on their own; she called up a woman neighbour, whose husband offered to accompany her here."

The man, who had heard this, said good evening, smiled his gratitude to Lucas.

"What does the surgeon say?"

They were outside the door of the operating-theatre and spoke quietly. At the other end of the corridor, nurses, always with something in their hands, were incessantly coming and going, like ants.

"The bullet missed his heart, but has lodged in his right lung."

"Has Janvier said anything?"

"No. When the police ambulance arrived at the Rue Lhomond, Janvier was unconscious."

"Do you think they'll save him, Chief Inspector?" asked Madame Janvier, who was visibly pregnant and had reddish patches under her eyes.

“There’s no reason to think he won’t come through all right.”

“You can see now why I’ve been worried every time he’s spent the night out!”

They lived in the suburbs, a small house Janvier had had built three years earlier when it became too difficult to bring up the children in a Paris flat. He was very proud of his garden.

They exchanged another phrase or two, without much conviction, looking anxiously at the door which still had not been opened. Maigret had taken his pipe out of his pocket, then replaced it, remembering that smoking was not permitted. He missed it badly. He almost went downstairs into the yard for a few puffs.

He did not want to ask Lucas what had happened, in front of Madame Janvier. Nor could he leave them. Apart from Lucas—his right hand—Janvier had always been his favourite inspector. He had been with him as a youngster, like Lapointe now, and sometimes he still called him “young” Janvier.

The door was opened at last. But it was only a red-haired nurse who dashed across to another door without giving them a glance, retraced her steps again, shielding something in her hand which they could not identify. They weren’t able to stop her and ask how the operation was going, but all four of them watched her face, all four of them were disappointed when they could make out only a look of professional preoccupation.

“I think that if anything happened to him I should die as well,” said Madame Janvier, who, in spite of a vacant chair, remained standing with them, nervously, as though she feared to lose a second by having to get up when the time came for the door to be opened properly.

There were noises. The folding doors opened. They saw a trolley. Maigret seized Madame Janvier’s arm to stop her rushing forward. He had a moment’s fear because, from his angle, he had the impression that Janvier’s face was covered with a sheet.

But when the trolley was wheeled past them he saw he was mistaken.

“Albert...” cried his wife, with a strangled sob.

“Ssssh...” said the surgeon, who came up to them pulling off his rubber gloves.

Janvier’s eyes were open and he must have recognized them, because he had a vague smile on his lips.

They were taking him towards one of the wards and his wife followed with Lucas and the neighbour, while the chief inspector, in a window embrasure, talked to the doctor.

“Will he live?”

“There’s no reason why he shouldn’t. The convalescence period will be long, as is always the case with lung injuries, and precautions will have to be taken, but he is in practically no danger.”

“Have you extracted the bullet?”

The surgeon went back into the operating-theatre for a moment and returned with a piece of cotton-wool spotted with blood, which contained a piece of lead.

“I’ll take it with me,” Maigret said. “I’ll send you a receipt for it later. He’s said nothing?”

“No. Under the anaesthetic he muttered a few words, but it was vague, and I was too busy to pay any attention.”

“When could I question him?”

“When he’s got over the shock, tomorrow, probably about mid-day. Is that his wife? Tell her not to worry. She shouldn’t try to see him until tomorrow. According to the instructions, he’s been given a private room and a nurse. Excuse me now, but I’m operating at seven o’clock tomorrow morning.”

Madame Janvier insisted on seeing her husband in his bed and they were kept waiting in the corridor until he was installed, and then they were allowed just to glance inside.

In a low voice, Madame Janvier gave some advice to the night-nurse, who seemed to be about fifty and looked like a

man in travesty.

Outside, they didn't know what to do. There was not a taxi in sight.

"I promise you," Maigret affirmed, "that everything is going well, and that the doctor is not at all concerned. Come along tomorrow about mid-day, not before. I'll have all the news regularly and I'll telephone you. Think of the children..."

They had to walk as far as the Rue Gay-Lussac before they found a cab, and the man with the moustache carefully took Maigret to one side.

"There's no need to worry about her. You can rely on my wife and me."

It was only when he was alone with Lucas on the pavement that Maigret wondered whether Madame Janvier would have any ready money. It was the end of the month. He didn't want to find her making the journey every day by train and underground. Taxis cost a lot. He would see to it tomorrow.

Turning at last to Lucas, he lit the pipe he had been holding in his hand for some time and asked him:

"What do you think?"

They were a few yards from the Rue Lhomond and they made their way to Mademoiselle Clément's boarding-house.

The street, deserted at that hour, was at its most provincial, with two-and three-storied houses sandwiched between blocks of flats. Mademoiselle Clément's house was one of these, with a small flight of three steps and a notice announcing:

"Rooms let by the month"

Two constables of the fifth arrondissement, chatting by the doorway, saluted the chief inspector.

There was a light above the door, as well as in the windows to the right and on the second floor. Maigret did not have to ring the bell. They must have been watching out for them, because the door opened and Inspector Vacher looked at Maigret interrogatively.

“He’ll be all right,” announced the latter.

And a woman’s voice, from the room on the right, called out:

“What did I tell you?”

It was a curious voice, childish and jolly at the same time. A very tall, very fat woman was framed in the door, held out her hand cordially, declaring:

“Delighted to make your acquaintance, Monsieur Maigret.”

She was like an enormous baby, with pink skin, indecisive shape, with great blue eyes, very blonde hair, a dress the colour of a lolly. Seeing her, one would suppose that nothing tragic had happened, that all was for the best in the best of worlds.

The room in which she received them was a cosy living-room, with three liqueur glasses on the table.

“I am Mademoiselle Clément,” she said. “I have succeeded in sending my lodgers to bed. But of course I can call them back if you wish. So, your inspector is not dead?”

“The bullet pierced his right lung.”

“Nowadays the doctors can repair things like that in a twinkling.”

Maigret was a little stupefied. For once, he had imagined everything quite differently, the house and the landlady. The two inspectors, Vauquelin and Vacher, who had been sent to the spot by Torrence as soon as the news of the attempted murder had come through, seemed to be enjoying his surprise; Vauquelin, more familiar with him than Vacher, even winked and nodded at the fat girl.

She must have been about forty or forty-five, but in appearance she was ageless. It was as if, despite her impressive bulk, she weighed less than nothing. And she was so full of exuberance that they expected to see her, regardless of the circumstances, burst into vivacious laughter.

It was a case in which Maigret had hardly been concerned personally. He had not been to the scene of the crime. He had

worked on the documents, in his office, leaving all responsibility for its conduct to Janvier, who had been delighted about it.

Nobody, at the Quai, would have thought for a moment that this case, which they called the “Stork” case, had any element of danger in it.

Five days earlier, at about half past two in the morning, two men had gone to a small nightclub, “The Stork”, in the Rue Campagne-Première, in Montparnasse, just as it was closing.

Their faces were covered with black masks, and one of them had a revolver in his hand.

At that time the only people left in the place had been the owner, a boy called Angelo and the cloakroom woman, who was busy putting her hat on in front of a mirror.

“The cash-box!” one of the masked individuals had demanded.

The club-owner had put up no resistance. He had pushed the night’s takings across the bar, and a few moments later the thieves had gone off in a black car.

It was Maigret who, the next morning, received the cloakroom attendant, a plump, once-beautiful woman.

“You’re sure you recognized him?”

“I didn’t see his face, if that’s what you mean. But I certainly saw the thread on his trousers and I recognized the material.”

A crazy detail, in reality. Two hours before the robbery, one of the customers seated at the bar had gone off to the cloakroom to wash his hands and do his hair.

“You know how it is. You happen to fix your eyes on one particular spot, without paying any attention to it. Just as I handed him the towel, I was staring at a piece of white cotton on his trousers, near the knee, on the left-hand side. The piece of thread was about four inches long and made a sort of pattern. I remember thinking to myself that it looked like someone’s face.”

She had been on the point of removing it, but had been prevented because the young man had gone out at that moment.

For it was a young man. A young lad, she said. She had seen him often at the bar, recently. One evening he had taken up with a girl who was a constant visitor to "The Stork" and had gone off with her.

"Would you like to take care of this one, Janvier?"

Within three hours, no more, one of the thieves had been identified. Janvier had only had to find the girl, a certain Lucette, who lived in a hotel in the neighbourhood.

"He spent the night with me."

"At his place?"

"No. Here. He was surprised when he heard I was from Limoges, because he was born there and his parents still live there. His name's Paulus. I'd reckoned he was no more than eighteen at most, but he's nineteen and a half."

It might have taken a good deal longer, but from the Hotels Section Janvier had found the name "Emile Paulus", from Limoges, registered for the past four months in a boarding-house in the Rue Lhomond.

At Mademoiselle Clément's.

"Do you want to give me a warrant, Chief?"

Janvier had taken someone along with him. It was about eleven o'clock in the morning, Maigret remembered, and the sun was shining.

He had come back two hours later and had placed on the chief-inspector's desk an envelope containing bank notes, together with a child's revolver and a piece of black cloth.

"It's certainly Paulus."

"The amount corresponds?"

"No. There's only half of it. The beauties must have divided it up. But there are three one-dollar bills included. I went along

to question the owner of “The Stork” and he confirmed that an American had been there that evening who paid in dollars.”

“What about Paulus?”

“His bed was unmade, but he wasn’t in his room. Mademoiselle Clément, the landlady, didn’t see him go out and says she thinks he left the house about ten o’clock in the morning as usual.”

“You’ve left someone there?”

“Yes. We are going to set a trap for him.”

They kept watch for four days, without any result. Maigret did not concern himself with it, noticed in the report the name of the inspector on duty and, regularly, the phrase “nothing of interest”.

The Press had said nothing of the police discovery. Paulus had taken no luggage away with him and it seemed likely that he would return to collect the little fortune he had left locked in his case.

“Did you keep watch too, Vacher?”

“Twice.”

“How did it go?”

“The first day I think Janvier stayed inside the house, upstairs, waiting for Paulus in his room.”

He glanced across at fat Mademoiselle Clément.

“He must have thought better of it. The boy could have been warned before he went up the stairs.”

“So what next?”

“We took it in turns outside. I didn’t get the chance of having a go at night. During the day it was easy and pleasant. There’s a small bistro a little farther along, on the other side, with two tables on the terrace. They serve meals there, and the food wasn’t so bad either, I can tell you.”

“Was the house searched the first day?”

It was Mademoiselle Clément who answered, excitedly, as if it were all some pleasant adventure:

“From the cellar to the attic, Monsieur Maigret. I might add that Monsieur Janvier came in to see me at least a dozen times. Something was riling him, I don’t know what. He spent hours upstairs, pacing up and down the room. At other times he came down here and sat chatting with me. By now he knows the life-history of all my lodgers.”

“What exactly happened this evening? You knew he was outside?”

“I didn’t know it was him, but I knew there was a policeman on watch out there.”

“Could you see him?”

“I glanced out about half past nine, before I went to bed. I saw somebody was on his beat on the pavement, but the street light is too far away for me to have been able to recognize the silhouette. I went back to my room.”

“Is it upstairs?”

“No. On the ground floor. It looks on to the yard. I started to undress and I was about to take off my stockings when I heard Mademoiselle Blanche come running down the stairs, shouting heaven knows what. She opened my door without knocking.”

“Was she dressed?”

“In a dressing-gown. Why? If she’s not going out she spends her evenings reading in bed. She’s a nice girl. Her room, on the first floor, next to the Lotards’, looks on to the street. She heard a gunshot, jumped out of bed and went to look out of the window. At first she noticed nothing. However, she seemed to think there was somebody running, but she’s not sure.”

“We questioned her,” Vauquelin said. “She isn’t even at all sure.”

“Windows were opened apparently. A woman opposite pointed to something on the pavement, on our pavement, and Mademoiselle Blanche saw a body lying there.”

“What did you do?”

“I put on my dress, rushed into the passage where there is a wall-telephone, and I rang the police. Monsieur Valentin came out of his room and I wanted to stop him opening the door. All the same he did so, and I think he was the first person to go right up to the body. He is a charming man, a real man of the world, you’ll see.”

Mademoiselle Blanche was a nice girl. Monsieur Valentin was charming. The Lotards were doubtless perfect angels. Mademoiselle Clément smiled on life, men and women, and Maigret.

“You’ll have a small glass of liqueur, I hope?”

It was chartreuse in the glasses, and she poured one for him with a greedy gesture.

“How do your lodgers get into the house during the night? Do they have keys?”

“No. They ring. I have a door-pull at the head of my bed, the same as concierges have, as well as an electric switch which turns on the light in the passage and on the stairs.”

“They call out their name?”

“It’s not necessary. Before opening the door, I turn on the passage light. My bedroom is at the end. It’s an old house, oddly built. It’s amusing. I only have to lean out of bed and, through a small window, I can see who comes in or goes out.”

“They also have to wake you up to go out?”

“Of course.”

“And during the day?”

“The door stays open. But there is another spy-window in the kitchen and nobody can go past without my knowing it. I’ll show you.”

She promised him this as if she were promising him a little treat.

“You have many lodgers?”

“Nine. I mean to say I have nine rooms to let. Actually, with Monsieur Paulus, that makes eleven people, because I’ve got two couples, one on the first and the other on the second floor.”

“Everybody had come in when the shot was fired?”

“No. Monsieur Lotard had gone out and returned a quarter of an hour later, when the police were already here. Mademoiselle Isabelle was not in her room either. She came back a little before midnight. These gentlemen questioned her as well as the others. Everybody realized that they must take it all in good part. They are all very nice people, you’ll see...”

It was almost two o’clock in the morning.

“May I use your telephone?”

“I’ll show you where it is.”

It was in the passage, under the stairs. Maigret observed the two windows Mademoiselle Clément had alluded to, which allowed her to keep watch on her lodgers, either from the kitchen or from the bedroom.

He dialled the hospital’s number, and his eyes fell on a sort of moneybox nailed to the wall. Above the money-box there was a handwritten notice, in beautiful round letters, which said:

“Tenants are requested to leave a franc here for every local call.

“For trunk calls and toll calls apply to Mademoiselle Clément. Thank you.”

“Don’t some of them cheat?” he asked with a smile.

“Sometimes. I watch them through my spy-hole. They’re not always the ones one would expect. Monsieur Paulus, for example, has never failed to put the money in the box.”

“Hallo! CochinHospital?”

They transferred him to at least four different departments, the voices everywhere half-asleep or harassed, until they

finally told him that Janvier had fallen into a deep sleep and that his temperature was satisfactory.

Then he called Juvisy to pass on the news to Madame Janvier, who spoke softly, because she was afraid of waking the children.

“Your inspector has confided in me that he is hoping for a girl this time,” said Mademoiselle Clément, when he had hung up. “We’ve had lovely long chats together. He is a very engaging man!”

Chapter II

« ^ »

There was a larger space at the entrance to the immense corridor, near the staircase, and two benches had been placed there, which looked like school forms.

It was here at mid-day, just as bells started ringing in various parts of the hospital—with a convent bell somewhere in the courtyards—that Maigret found Madame Janvier, who had arrived nearly half an hour earlier.

She was weary. Yet she gave him a smile to show that she intended to be strong. On all the floors they could hear a commotion as if in a barracks; it was probably the nurses, both male and female, changing duty. Some of them passed them, laughing and jostling each other.

The sunlight glittered and an occasional breath of air was almost warm. Maigret had no overcoat on: he wasn't used to not wearing it yet.

"They say they're coming to fetch us in a few minutes," Madame Janvier remarked.

She added with a touch of irony, of bitterness:

"They're making him look smart for us."

For here she was not allowed to do anything for her husband. Madame Janvier had periodically come to fetch her husband from the Quai des Orfèvres. Maigret met her from time to time. Nevertheless, for the first time he realized that she was looking almost faded. It was hardly ten years, nine actually, since Janvier had introduced him to his chubby-faced fiancée, whose cheeks dimpled when she laughed, and now already she had that sexless look, that too serious expression, like those women you see in the suburbs, obsessed by their housekeeping, with their aching backs.

"Give me a frank answer, Chief-Inspector: do you think they had it in for him personally?"

He knew what was on her mind, and reflected before replying, although he had already considered the idea that morning.

Naturally, since Janvier had been attacked in the Rue Lhomond, everybody immediately thought of Paulus. But, as Maigret had said to the Commissioner at Police Headquarters at the time of the conference, this hypothesis was becoming more improbable the more they reflected on it.

“The boy’s not a killer, Chief. I’ve been able to find out a few things about him. When he arrived in Paris, eighteen months ago, he was employed by a property dealer in the Boulevard Saint-Denis.”

He had been there. The offices were on the entresol, they were dirty and cheap, as was the proprietor who looked like a pimp.

Round the walls, drawing-pins held up little handwritten notices advertising the different business properties for sale, mainly cafés and bars. It had been Paulus’s job to write out the notices in his own hand, and also to send out hundreds of circulars.

Another half-starved adolescent, with his hair too long, was now working in the waiting-room, where the electric lights had to be kept on all day.

“Paulus?” said the proprietor, in a strong peasant accent. “I gave him the sack.”

“Why?”

“Because he kept sneaking francs every day from the petty cash.”

This was a drawer where there was always some money, not much, for small running expenses, stamps, registered letters, telegrams.

“Six months ago, Chief,” Maigret had continued, “Paulus left that place. His parents sent him a little money, but not enough to live on, since they’re not rich people. Finally he started selling encyclopaedias from door to door. I found his brief-case with a sample copy in it, as well as some forms to

sign for the people who bought the twenty-two or twenty-four volumes on the hire-purchase.”

They were going on with the investigation, of course. Paris smelt of spring. The buds on the chestnuts burst and spurted minute leaves of soft green. Thousands of young people like Paulus and his successor were wandering round the streets of Paris, their eyes wild, looking for a place, a future.

“He must have met an older youth, somebody with more know-how too, probably. Mademoiselle Clément says that he occasionally had a friend there and that this friend had at least twice slept in Paulus’s room. He’s dark, about twenty-five. We’ll catch up with him. What strikes me as odd, is that to raid “The Stork” they used a toy pistol.”

To frighten a night-club owner with a toy and to shoot a detective in the street, in cold blood, are two very different things.

“You don’t think, Maigret, that his friend could have done the job?”

“With what motive? There could only just have been two reasons to attack Janvier: to get into the house to collect the loot, which would have been risky, or to make the way clear for somebody to get out. Well, Mademoiselle Clément was definite. Nobody came in or went out.”

“Unless Janvier has unearthed a vital clue and...”

Maigret had been thinking this over all the morning while Vauquelin remained on guard at the house in the Rue Lhomond, where Mademoiselle Clément had installed him in the living-room, near the open window.

The chief-inspector had even searched Janvier’s private desk, drawn up a list of all the cases the detective had been working on over the last few months.

He had found out nothing.

“We’ll soon see whether he has any idea!” he had sighed.

Madame Janvier was drumming nervously on her handbag, and, probably because she thought she looked too pale, she-

had put twice as much rouge on her cheeks as was necessary, clumsily, so that it made her seem to be feverish.

Somebody came to fetch them. The nurse, before letting them into the room, gave them some advice.

“You can stay not more than a few minutes. You’re not to tire him. Don’t talk about anything that might upset him.”

It was the first time Maigret had seen the detective in bed and he seemed to him even more changed, since Janvier, whose baby-face was normally closely shaven, the skin pink and tight, already had the traces of a beard.

The nurse also had something to say to him.

“Don’t forget what the doctor told you. He has strictly forbidden you to speak. If the chief-inspector has questions to ask you, reply by saying yes or no with your eyelids. Don’t try and move. Don’t get excited.”

She added, as she walked towards a small table where there was a newspaper:

“I shall stay here in any case.”

And she settled herself into a chair.

Maigret was standing near the door, so that Janvier could not yet see him. Madame Janvier, who had approached the foot of the bed, her hands clutching her bag, looked at her husband with a timid smile and murmured:

“Don’t worry, Albert. Everything’s all right. Everybody has been very nice to me and the children are well. You haven’t been feeling too awful, have you?”

It was rather moving to see two large tears suddenly flood the eyes of the wounded man, who was staring hard at his wife as if he had not hoped to see her again.

“Above all, you mustn’t worry about us. The chief-inspector is here...”

Had she noticed that, after the first feeling of emotion, Janvier had been looking for somebody with his eyes? It was almost embarrassing. Janvier belonged to his family, of course,

adored his wife and children. Nevertheless Maigret had the feeling that he was putting his duties as a policeman first.

He came forward a couple of paces, and when he saw him, the detective's face brightened, he wanted to speak in spite of the interdiction; Maigret had to prevent him with a sign.

"Quietly, young Janvier. Let me tell you first how pleased we all are you've pulled through. The Chief asked me to give you his compliments and best wishes. He'll be along himself when visitors no longer tire you."

Discreetly, Madame Janvier had drawn back a little.

"The doctor has only allowed us a few minutes. I'm looking after the case now. Are you feeling strong enough for me to ask a few questions? You heard what the nurse said: answer by closing your eyelids. Don't try and speak."

A broad beam of sunlight crossed the room, vibrant with fine particles of dust, as if the air had suddenly disclosed its intimate life.

"Did you see the person who shot you?"

Janvier, without hesitating, made a negative sign.

"They picked you up from the right-hand pavement, that's to say, Mademoiselle Clément's pavement, just outside her house. It doesn't appear that you had had time to drag yourself anywhere before they found you. The street was deserted, wasn't it?"

His eyelids blinked.

"You were walking up and down?"

They blinked once again.

"You didn't hear anybody coming?"

Negative sign.

"And during the previous hours, you didn't notice anybody spying on you?"

It was another no.

"Did you light a cigarette?"

There was a mark of astonishment in Janvier's eyes, then he smiled slightly. He had understood what Maigret was driving at.

"Yes," said the eyelids.

According to the doctor, indeed, the shot had been fired from a distance of about ten yards. Now there was no street-lamp near Mademoiselle Clément's house. Janvier had been a mere silhouette in the night.

At the instant he had lit his cigarette, he had obviously offered a more distinct target.

"You didn't at any moment hear a window open?"

The wounded man took time to ponder, said no with his head, only with a certain hesitation.

"You mean that at that moment you did not hear the noise of a window?"

That was it.

"I suppose during the evening lots of windows were opened or closed?"

The evening had been such a mild one it was only to be expected. Janvier confirmed this.

"In Mademoiselle Clément's house as well?"

Yes again.

"But not about the time the shot was fired?"

No.

"You did not see or hear anybody?"

No.

"Can you remember which direction you were facing when you were hit?"

There was nothing really to be deduced from the position of the body when it had been found, since a man, when he is hit, may half-turn or turn completely as he falls.

The effort Janvier made to remember gave his face a painful expression. Madame Janvier was no longer listening to them. She was not just being discreet. She had gone over to the nurse and was speaking to her in a low voice, presumably asking questions, risking a few timid pieces of advice.

No, Janvier could not remember. This was to be expected, too. He had walked up and down so often, that evening, on the same stretch of pavement...

"Had you unearthed a clue, about Paulus or his accomplice, a clue which isn't mentioned in your reports?"

It was almost the only plausible explanation, but, once more, Janvier replied negatively.

"You hadn't found out anything new on another case you were working on, even an old case?"

Janvier smiled again, following Maigret's reasoning.

It was no. All the explanations were being proved false, one after the other.

"In short, you lit a cigarette and the shot rang out. You didn't hear any steps. You didn't hear any other sound. You fell and lost consciousness."

"Chief-Inspector," broke in the nurse, "I'm sorry to have to interrupt you; but the doctor's orders are strict."

"Don't worry, young Janvier. Above all, don't think any more about this business."

He saw a question on the detective's lips and he too knew him well enough to guess what it was.

"From today I'm moving into the Rue Lhomond, into Mademoiselle Clément's house, and I'm bound to find out the truth sooner or later, aren't I?"

Poor Janvier! It was obvious that he was imagining the chief-inspector in the fat girl's boarding-house and wanted badly to be able to go along with him!

"I'll have to go now, Albert. Madame Dambois has been kind enough to mind the children while I'm out. I'll come

every day. They tell me I'll be able to stay a little longer tomorrow."

She was trying to be brave, but when she was outside in the corridor with Maigret, she couldn't stop herself from crying as she walked along, and he kindly took her arm, without saying anything, without trying to comfort her.

He preferred to telephone from his flat, which now seemed almost strange to him. It was not just that he was alone, without anybody to speak to, but he was not accustomed to being there at this time of day, except on Sundays.

He had opened all the windows wide, poured himself a small glass of sloe-gin, and while he waited for his call to come through, he was stuffing some clothes and his toilet articles into his old leather bag.

It was in a hospital too that he finally contacted Madame Maigret, as she had managed to obtain permission to stay there with her sister who was just starting her convalescence.

Probably because she felt far away and was afraid he would not hear her, she put on a strident voice which he did not recognize and which made the telephone vibrate.

"Of course not, nothing has happened to me. I just telephoned to tell you not to call me here this evening. And to explain why you didn't reach me last night."

They had arranged that she should ring him every evening about eleven o'clock.

"Janvier has been hurt. Yes. Janvier... No. He's out of danger... Hallo! But because I've got to carry on with his investigation, I have to move into the Rue Lhomond... It's a boarding-house... I'll be quite all right there... Of course I will!... I promise you... The landlady is charming..."

He had not meant to use this word, and it made him smile.

"Have you a pencil and paper? Take down the number... From now on, call me a little earlier, between nine and ten, so we won't wake up the whole household, because the telephone is in the passage on the ground floor... No, I haven't forgotten

anything... It's almost hot... I swear there's no need for an overcoat..."

He made another visit to the sideboard, replaced the small bottle with its golden rim, and finally left home, his heavy case in his hand, locked the door with the slight feeling that he was committing some sort of treason.

Was it only because of the investigation that he was moving into the Rue Lhomond, or was it because he hated going back to an empty flat?

Mademoiselle Clément rushed out to meet him, quite excited, her great breasts shaking inside her dress at every movement like jelly.

"I haven't touched a thing in the room, since you told me not to; I've just changed the sheets and put out clean covers."

Vauquelin had got up from his armchair near the window in the front room, where he had a cup of coffee within reach, and insisted on carrying the chief-inspector's suitcase upstairs.

It was an odd house, which didn't fit exactly into any particular class of boarding-house. Though old, it was astonishingly clean, and more than anything it had an air of gaiety. The coloured wallpapers, everywhere, including the staircase, were bright, pale yellow for the most part, with little flower-designs, not a bit old fashioned or hackneyed.

The woodwork, polished with age, gleamed with flickering reflections and the uncarpeted stairs smelt pleasantly of wax.

The rooms were larger than in most boarding-houses. They were more like those in good country inns, and almost all the furniture was old, the wardrobes tall and deep, the chests-of-drawers bow-fronted.

Mademoiselle Clément had taken the unexpected trouble to put a few flowers in a vase on the middle of the round table, plain straightforward flowers which she must have bought off a little barrow while doing her shopping.

She had come upstairs with the men.

“Wouldn’t you like me to unpack for you? I’ve got the feeling you’re probably not very used to it.”

She added, laughing with a curious laugh in her throat which made her bosom quiver:

“Unless you’ve got things in your suitcase I mustn’t see?”

He guessed she behaved just the same with all her boarders, not out of servility, nor through professional pride, but just because she liked to. He wondered even if there wasn’t something of Madame Maigret in her, a Madame Maigret with no husband to care for, who made up for it by pampering her boarders.

“Have you kept this boarding-house long, Mademoiselle Clément?”

“For ten years, Monsieur Maigret.”

“Are you a native of Paris?”

“Of Lille. Strictly speaking, of Roubaix. Do you know the Brasserie Flamande, at Roubaix? My father was a waiter there for nearly forty years and everyone knew him. I was under twenty when I started there as a cashier.”

To hear the way she spoke, one might have thought that she had played at being a cashier, as she played with her dolls as a child, and now seemed to play at being a boarding-house landlady.

“It was my ambition to set up in Paris on my own, and when my father died and left me a spot of capital, I took this house. I could never live alone. I need to feel life going on around me.”

“Have you never thought of getting married?”

“I wouldn’t be my own mistress any longer. Now, if you don’t mind, you can go downstairs for a while. I’d be embarrassed to do your unpacking in front of you. I’d sooner you left me on my own.”

Maigret signed to Vauquelin to follow him. On the stairs, they heard a piano trilling, a woman practising singing. It was coming from the ground floor.

“Who’s that?”

And Vauquelin, who knew the house already, explained:

“Monsieur Valentin. His real name is Valentin Desquerre. He was fairly well known as a light opera singer, thirty years ago, under the name of Valentin.”

“That’s the room on the left, if I remember rightly?”

“Yes. Not just a room, but a flat. He has a little drawing-room in front, where he gives his singing lessons, then a bedroom, a bathroom and even a kitchen. He does his own cooking. His pupils are mostly young girls...”

Vauquelin added, taking some papers out of his pocket, when they reached the ground floor:

“I’ve drawn up a plan of the building for you, with the names of the lodgers and a brief history of each of them. Not that you’ll really need it, for Mademoiselle Clément will tell you the whole lot without your having to ask. It’s a funny house, as you’ll see. People come in and out as if they were at home, use the kitchen, heat themselves some coffee, and, with the telephone in the corridor, everyone knows all the goings-on of everyone else. Mademoiselle Clément will want to get meals for you. She tried with me. I preferred to go to the little bistro a few doors down the street.”

They repaired there together. The awning was stretched out above the two little tables on the terrace and, inside, a builder was drinking a glass of white wine. The *patron* was an Auvergnat with a blue-grey moustache, his hair plastered low on his forehead.

It was hard to imagine that the Boulevard Saint-Michel, and all its bustle, was only round the corner. There were children playing in the middle of the street, as in a small country town. The sound of hammering could be heard from a nearby workshop.

“I think I’ll be taking all my meals here for the next few days,” Maigret told the *patron*.

“So long as you’re not too fussy, the missis’ll do her best...”

As early as eleven o'clock that morning, Gastine-Renette, the small-arms expert, had submitted his report, which had slightly shaken Maigret. The bullet that had wounded Janvier, it appeared, was fired by a large-bore revolver, probably a Colt.

So it was a heavy gun, a cumbersome one, the sort they used in the army; it would have been difficult to hide in the pocket of a suit.

"Nobody's been wandering around the house this morning?" the chief-inspector asked Vauquelin while they were drinking.

"A few journalists. Some press photographers."

"You didn't have any interesting phone calls?"

"No. A man rang up for the girl called Blanche, and she came downstairs in her pyjamas and a dressing-gown. A pretty girl."

"When was this?"

"Eleven o'clock."

"Did she go out?"

"No. She went back to bed."

"What does she do for a living?"

"Nothing. She calls herself a dramatic artiste, because she sometimes gets small parts at the Châtelet and places like that. An uncle comes to see her two or three times a week."

"An uncle?"

"I'm talking like Mademoiselle Clément. Incidentally, I wonder if that woman pretends to be a fool or whether she is really so naïve. If it's the latter, she'd swallow anything she was told."

" 'Mademoiselle Blanche is learning her parts, you know,' she said to me. 'That's why she's almost always in bed. Her uncle takes a lot of trouble over her. He wants to make her a great actress. She's very young; only just twenty-two...' "

"Have you seen the uncle?"

“Not yet. It’s his day tomorrow. All I know is that he ‘comes from a very good family’ and is ‘always perfectly correct’...”

“And the others?”

“All equally charming, of course. Everybody is ‘charming’ in that house. Above Monsieur Valentin, on the first floor, live the Lotards, who’ve got a baby of twelve months.”

“Why do they live in a boarding-house?”

“They haven’t been long in Paris and they say they haven’t been able to find a flat. They cook on a petrol stove, in the lavatory. I went into their room; there are lines stretched from one wall to the other with washing hanging up to dry.”

“What does Lotard do?”

“In insurance. About thirty years old; tall and sad; his wife’s a little duck-arsed woman who comes downstairs now and then to have a chat with Mademoiselle Clément, leaving her door open so she can hear if the baby wakes up. She hates Monsieur Valentin because of his piano. Monsieur Valentin must hate her, because the baby cries every night.”

“Do they have a whole flat, too?”

“Only one room and a lavatory. Behind them, in the room which looks on to the yard, there is a student, Oscar Fachin, who makes a living by copying out music and looks as though he doesn’t get a square meal every day. Now and then Mademoiselle Clément takes him up a cup of tea. She says he always refuses at first, because he’s very proud. When he’s away, she goes and hunts out his socks and mends them for him. He hides them, but she always succeeds in putting her hands on them.”

What could Paulus be doing as they chatted there at the bar-counter, drinking white wine, the air warm from the sun wafted in through the open door?

The police had his description. He must know by now that the house in the Rue Lhomond was being watched. He probably knew it from the time the place had first been searched, since he had not returned.

Maigret had given Lucas the job of finding him, as well as his accomplice, the dark man who was about twenty-five.

“Shall I go on looking after the house?” asked Vauquelin; he was becoming a bit bored with Mademoiselle Clément and this quiet little street.

“No. Anyway, not the house exactly. Later on, about supper-time, when everyone will be home, I would like you to go and ask all the neighbours some questions. It’s possible that somebody saw or heard something.”

Maigret dined alone at the Auvergnat’s, reading the evening paper, occasionally glancing across at the boarding-house.

When he went back there, at about half past seven, there was a pretty girl in the second room, which was used as a kitchen and dining-room. She was wearing a bright-red little hat. She was fresh-faced, with curly blonde hair.

“Mademoiselle Isabelle!” introduced Mademoiselle Clément. “She lives on the second floor. She is a typist in an office in the Rue Montmartre.”

“Chief-Inspector Maigret.”

He gave her a salute.

“Mademoiselle Isabelle has just been telling me that Paulus was courting her. I knew nothing about it.”

“Oh, it was so vague... I don’t think you could call it courting... I only mentioned it to show what type of boy he was...”

“And what type was he?”

“In the mornings I usually eat a croissant in a bar in the Rue Gay-Lussac before catching the métro. One day I noticed a young man drinking his coffee at the same counter, and he stared hard at me. Or more exactly, he stared at me in the mirror. We had never had occasion to talk before, but I recognized him. He must have recognized me too. When I left, he followed me. Then I heard his steps become quicker, I saw his shadow passing me, he came up to me and asked if he might accompany me.”

“Isn’t that lovely!” exclaimed Mademoiselle Clément.

“I was probably in a bad mood that morning. I’m never in a very good mood in the morning. I told him I was big enough now to find my own way.”

“And then?”

“Nothing. Before I could look round, he had turned back, muttering some excuse. That’s why I was telling Mademoiselle Clément about it. It’s not very often young men are quite so shy. They usually insist, if only so as not to lose face.”

“So you find it strange that such a shy young man should attack the owner of a night-club, and then, later, shoot a police inspector?”

“Doesn’t it seem odd to you?”

They had not been able to hide from the Press for long the identity of the “gangster of the Rue Campagne-Première”, as the papers called him. They had even published, on the front page, a photograph found amongst his things upstairs.

“Just think, if you had listened to him, nothing might have happened,” Mademoiselle Clément said dreamily to the girl.

“What do you mean?”

“He might have become your boy-friend. He would have had other things to think about than raiding a bar...”

“I must be off now. I’m going to the cinema with a friend. Good night, Chief-Inspector...”

When she had left, Mademoiselle Clément murmured:

“Isn’t she delightful? Every evening it’s the same. She comes and tells me that she’s not going out, that she has some sewing she’s behind with, because she makes her own clothes. Then, half an hour later, I hear her coming down the stairs, with her hat on. She’s suddenly remembered she had to meet a girl-friend and go to the cinema. These young things, they hate to feel shut in...”

“Has she got a boy-friend?”

“Only a cousin.”

“And he comes to see her sometimes?”

“He goes up for a moment when they are going out together, all fair and above board. It doesn’t happen often, because I think he works in the evenings. Except, on Sundays...”

“On Sundays?”

“They go into the country. When it rains, they stay upstairs.”

She looked at him with a disarming smile.

“Altogether your boarders seem a very decent lot.”

“There are so many more decent folk in the world than one thinks! I just don’t understand why people try to see evil everywhere. Look! Here’s Monsieur Kridelka home,” she added after a glance through her spy-window.

He was a man of about forty, his hair blacker than the Auvergnat’s in the bistro, with a pale skin, who was automatically wiping his feet on the mat before climbing the stairs.

“He lives on the second floor, too, in the room next to Mademoiselle Isabelle.”

Maigret consulted the notes Vauquelin had handed over to him. “He’s a Yugoslav,” he said.

“He’s been living in Paris for a long time.”

“What does he do?”

“You’d never guess. He’s a nurse in a lunatic asylum. That’s probably why he doesn’t ever talk much. They say it’s a very arduous job. He deserves to be admired, since in his own country he was a lawyer. Wouldn’t you like to come and sit down in the drawing-room?” She took a seat, some pale blue knitting on her knees, and began juggling with the needles.

“It’s for the Lotards’ baby. Some landladies refuse to have children in their houses. As far as I’m concerned, as I said, I like the lot, pianos, babies and all. Madame Saft’s expecting a baby, as well.”

“Who’s she?”

“Second floor, on the right of the passage. She’s French, but he’s Polish. If you’d arrived a few minutes earlier you’d have seen him come in. He does the shopping on his way home from the office. They mostly eat cold food. I don’t think she likes cooking. She was a student. He has finished his studies.”

“What studies?”

“Chemistry. He couldn’t find a job as an industrial chemist, so he’s working as a pharmacist’s assistant near the Rue de Rennes. Some people have got courage, don’t you find? They haven’t been able to find a flat either. When a couple come to see me, I know in advance what they’re going to say, that it’s only temporary, that they will soon be finding a flat. The Lotards have been waiting for one for three years. The Safts hope to move before the baby comes.”

That made her laugh, her strange throaty laugh. It did not need much to make her delighted. She reminded one of those good Sisters who brighten the life of a convent by the amusement they find in the most innocent jokes.

“Did you know Paulus well, Mademoiselle Clément?”

“I knew him as well as the others. He was only here five months.”

“What sort of a boy was he?”

“You heard what Mademoiselle Isabelle told you. That’s him to a tee. He was so shy that he would turn his face the other way when he passed my window.”

“Did he receive much mail?”

“Only letters from Limoges. They came from his family. I could recognise the writing of his father and his mother. His mother wrote twice a week and his father once a month. He was always a little alarmed when I gave him the ones from his father.”

“He never had any women in his room?”

“He wouldn’t have dared.”

“When his friend came to see him, did you know he would be sleeping here?”

“No. And I was even worried about it, the first time. I was waiting for him to leave before I went to sleep, because I hate to be woken up after I’ve just dozed off. In the morning he crept down on tiptoe, just before it was really daylight, and that amused me. I had a brother like that. He’s married now and lives in Indo-China. When we were at home and he was seventeen or eighteen, he used to bring friends to his room on the sly, boys who were frightened to go home because it was too late!”

“Paulus never confided in you?”

“We became quite friendly, towards the end. He sometimes came in to say good evening, tell me how difficult it was to sell those encyclopaedias. His briefcase was so heavy, with that big book inside it, that his arm became stiff. He didn’t always eat enough, I’m sure of that.”

“How do you know?”

“Now and then he came in as I was about to eat. I only had to see the look he gave my plate, the way he sniffed at the smell of cooking, to understand. I said to him kindly: ‘At least you’ll share a bowl of soup with me, Monsieur Paulus!’ He refused at first, pretending that he’d just had a meal. Then he finally sat down opposite me.”

She looked at him with her clear eyes.

“Did he pay the rent regularly?”

“It’s obvious you’ve never run a boarding-house, Monsieur Maigret. They *never* pay regularly, *nobody* does, you understand. If they had enough to pay me regularly, they would probably not be here. I don’t want to be indiscreet or I would show you my notebook, where I write down all the amounts they owe me.

“But they’re honest, all the same. They always give me the money in the end, if it’s often in tiny sums.”

“Even Monsieur Valentin?”

“He’s more broke than anybody else. The little girls who come for singing-lessons pay even less regularly and some of them don’t pay him at all.”

“But he gives them lessons all the same?”

“Probably because he thinks they’ve got some talent. He is so kind!”

Just at that moment Maigret turned towards her, for no precise reason, and he felt he caught a look on the fat girl’s face that was different from usual. Unfortunately it was only for a flash, and the next moment her eyes were lowered over her pale blue knitting.

He thought he had noticed, in place of the joyful candour which she usually showed, a look of irony, no less gay, no less childlike, but it was a look that troubled him.

To start with, he had told himself that she was a phenomenon one came across from time to time.

Now he was wondering whether her gaiety did not arise from the fact that she was acting a part, not only to deceive him, not only to hide something from him, but for the fun of play-acting.

“Do you enjoy yourself, Mademoiselle Clément?”

“I always enjoy life, Monsieur Maigret.”

This time she looked at him with all her old candour. In girls’ schools it is not unusual to find at least one little girl who outgrows the others by a head and has this same distended mass of flesh. At thirteen or fourteen they look like enormous rag dolls, with bright eyes which see nothing of real life, and smiles turned inward on their dreams.

Until now Maigret had never known one of forty.

The smoke from his pipe was making the air in the room bluer every moment and it formed a moving sheet around the salmon-pink lampshade.

It was an odd sensation, to be there in an armchair, almost as if he were at home, except that, at home, he would have

taken off his jacket. But then again, he was convinced that in a day or two she would be inviting him to do just that.

He jumped when he heard the telephone ring, looked at his watch.

“That will probably be for me...” he said, hastening out.

And, as on the previous evening in the streets, he was a little embarrassed, felt almost guilty.

“It’s me, yes... You didn’t have too much trouble getting through?... I’m fine... Fine... I assure you I’m very well... Of course not, everything’s quiet... They’re looking after me, yes... How’s your sister?...”

When he had hung up and returned to the sitting-room, Mademoiselle Clément’s eyes were lowered over her work and she waited till he was seated and had lit his pipe again before asking in a light-hearted voice:

“Your wife?”

Chapter III

« ^ »

Maigret spent a good part of the night swearing, grunting, occasionally moaning; a dozen times he cursed himself for having had the idea of moving into the boarding-house in the Rue Lhomond and there were moments when he felt ashamed, as if he were accusing himself of falling for some shameful temptation, in any case for some inadmissible weakness; then, all things considered, in the morning, he was very happy to be there.

Was it the fault of the chartreuse? He had always hated liqueurs. Mademoiselle Clément, on the contrary, seemed to delight in them.

As had already happened the previous night, she had before long gone to fetch the bottle from the sideboard, and the mere sight of the syrupy green liquid transformed her expression into one of child-like greed, her eyes gleamed, her lips moistened.

He had not had the strength of mind to refuse. The evening had consequently been one of green and blue, the green of the liqueur and the pale blue of the knitting which was lengthening imperceptibly in the landlady's lap.

They had not drunk much, for the glasses were minute. When he had gone upstairs to his room, Maigret was not the slightest bit tight, and Mademoiselle Clément, when he said good night to her downstairs, had only let out a laugh a little louder than usual.

He had not turned on the lights at once. After removing his tie and opening his collar, he had walked over to the window and leant his elbows on the sill, as thousands of other Parisians must have done that night.

The air was soft like velvet, almost palpable. Not a movement, not a sound disturbed the peace of the Rue Lhomond which slopes gently down towards the lights of the Rue Mouffetard. Somewhere, behind the houses, could be heard a dull roar, the deadened noise of cars driving along the Boulevard Saint-Michel, of brakes and horns, but that was in another world and, between the roofs of the houses, between the chimneys, one could enjoy a glimpse of infinity inhabited only by stars.

Monsieur Kridelka must have been asleep in the next room, for there was not a sound and no light in his window.

By craning his head, Maigret could see, or rather guess in the darkness, the spot on the pavement where Janvier had fallen.

The street-lamp was farther along, brilliant, solitary.

After a moment of stillness, the pulse-beat of the house could be felt or imagined.

On the first floor, the Lotards were in bed, too. But one of them, the wife probably, was getting out again before long, because the baby was whimpering. She didn't put on the light, only a night-light, since there just came a very faint glow from their window. In her nightdress, bare-footed, she must have been preparing something for the child, probably a bottle; he

thought he heard the clink of a glass, and at the same time she hummed a tune in an automatic voice.

About this time, around half past eleven, Mademoiselle Blanche put out her light. She had finished her book and, shortly afterwards, there came the rush of the lavatory cistern.

The little bistro, farther along, where Maigret had dined, had been shut for a long time, and it was about this very time, too, that Maigret, for some reason, began to think of a glass of ice-cold beer. Perhaps because a bus had just braked near the Boulevard Saint-Michel, conjuring up the brasseries there?

It quickly became an obsession. The chartreuse left him with a nasty taste in his mouth, and he felt his throat was still fatty from the mutton stew he had eaten at the Auvergnat's and had found so savoury.

For a second, he hesitated whether to put on his tie again, go down the stairs without making a sound, dash for the nearest brasserie.

Mademoiselle Clément was in bed. He would have to wake her when he went out, then again when he came in.

He lit his pipe, still leaning against the window-sill, breathing in the night air, but the idea of the beer would not leave him.

Here and there, in the blackness of the houses opposite, were etched rectangles, more or less luminous, not many, five or six, and every so often one of them disappeared; every so often, behind the curtains or the blinds, shadows could be seen moving in silence.

It must have been exactly the same the night before, when poor Janvier was walking up and down on the pavement.

He heard a noise, from the bottom of the street. Then voices resounding oddly between the houses, a man's voice and a woman's Voice. You could almost make out what they were saying. They were walking arm in arm. They stopped two houses farther down. A hand pulled the bell and a little later the couple disappeared, a door closed again loudly.

Opposite him, on the first floor, behind a faintly illuminated blind, a man was continually going to and fro, then became invisible, only to reappear again.

A taxi stopped outside the door. Several minutes passed and nobody got out, and Maigret thought a couple must be kissing inside. It was Mademoiselle Isabelle who finally emerged, friskily, and walked towards the threshold, turning round several times to the person in the cab.

He heard the muffled bell, thought of Mademoiselle Clément, asleep, who would press her face to the spy-window after turning on the light. Steps on the stairs. Then, very near him, a key in a lock and, almost immediately afterwards, the creaking of a mattress, a pair of shoes falling on the floor. He could have sworn that the girl had given a sigh of relief as she took her shoes off and that she was now stroking her sore feet.

She undressed and ran the tap.

This noise made him even thirstier and he too walked over to the basin, filled his tooth-mug. The liquid was tasteless.

Then he undressed, in a bad mood, the window still open, brushed his teeth and went to bed.

He imagined he was going to sleep immediately. He felt drowsy. His breathing was becoming regular. The images of the day began to become confused as he dozed.

But, five or ten minutes later, he was wide awake, eyes open, thinking more insistently than ever of a glass of beer. This time he felt burning in his stomach and he knew for sure that it was the mutton stew. At the Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, he would have got up and taken a little bicarbonate of soda. He had brought none with him, and he did not dare wake Mademoiselle Clément to ask her for some.

He shut his eyes again, burrowed down into the bed as far as possible, and then he began to feel little eddies of cold air creeping about his head and the nape of his neck.

He got up to close the window. The man opposite had still not gone to bed. He was pacing up and down the room behind the blind, and Maigret wondered what he could be doing,

going around in circles like that. Perhaps he was an actor learning his part? Or was he talking to somebody sitting down, whose silhouette could not be seen?

There was another light, high up, in an attic window of the same building, and he was to see that same light in the early hours of the morning.

He slept, he must have slept. An uncomfortable, disturbed sleep, without quite losing consciousness of his environment, nor of his problems, which, on the contrary, took on an exaggerated importance.

It was becoming almost an affair of state, even worse, a matter of life and death. The smallest details grew swollen as though seen through a drunken stupor. He became responsible not only for Janvier, but for Janvier's wife, who was expecting a baby and was so brave and so tired.

Had she not looked at him as though to say she was putting her own fate, and that of the baby which would soon be born, into his hands? And Madame Maigret was not there. And for this too, God knows for what reason, he felt guilty.

He was thirsty. From time to time, the burning in his chest became sharper and he found himself groaning; he must be careful not to wake the other tenants, especially not the Lotards' baby, which had gone back to sleep.

As for himself, he had no right to be asleep. He was here to keep a watch on the place. His job was to listen for noises, to keep an eye on all comings and goings.

A taxi passing in the street made such a din that it seemed to insult the silence. It stopped. A door banged. But it was farther up the street, ten houses farther on, at least.

Everybody was asleep. He thought of Mademoiselle Isabelle turning over in bed and the blonde girl's body, already damp with sweat. The Safts, in the other room, were sleeping in the same bed. He had visited their room. The bed was so narrow he wondered how the two of them managed.

He sat up in bed. Or, more correctly, he found himself sitting up in bed without being aware of having moved, and

then, suddenly, he pricked up his ears. He was sure he had heard an odd noise, probably the clinking of china or crockery.

He waited, motionless, not breathing, and there came a second noise, on the ground floor, the noise, this time, of a cupboard door shutting.

He struck a match to see his watch. It was half past two in the morning.

He walked in bare feet to the door, half opened it with care, then, certain that someone was out of bed, he pulled on his trousers, crept down the stairs.

He hadn't reached the first floor when a step creaked. It probably creaked like that always. In every house there is at least one creaking step. He could have sworn that the instant before there had been a dim gleam from the passage, as if it had filtered below the door of a lighted room:

So it had been swiftly extinguished. He stopped. And the more he listened the more he was sure somebody else was listening, someone who, like himself, was holding his breath in the dark.

He went down more quickly, felt around for the handle of the kitchen door.

A cup fell to the ground and broke.

He switched on the light.

Before him stood Mademoiselle Clément, in her nightdress, her hair held up in a sort of net. For a moment her face revealed nothing more than an expression of confusion, but then, just when he was least expecting it, she let out that great throaty laugh which made her big bosom shake.

"You gave me a fright," she cried. "My God, you frightened me!"

The gas was burning on the stove. The kitchen smelt of freshly made coffee. On the oilcloth spread over the table, there was an enormous ham sandwich.

"I was so frightened when I heard your footsteps that I put the light out. As the steps came closer I dropped my cup..."

In spite of her fatness, her body beneath the nightdress was still young and attractive.

“Were you hungry too?”

He asked, not knowing where to look:

“You got up to have something to eat?”

She laughed again, more shortly, blushed a little.

“This happens almost every night. I know I shouldn’t eat so much, but I can’t help it. I’m like the King of France who always had a cold chicken on his bedside table.”

She took another cup from the cupboard.

“Would you like some coffee?”

He didn’t dare ask if she had some beer by any chance. She poured him out a cup, allowing no refusal.

“I think I’d better go and put on a dressing-gown. If someone came in...”

It was really very funny. Maigret had no jacket on. His braces hung down his legs and his hair was standing on end.

“Will you excuse me a moment?”

She went into her bedroom, came back almost immediately, and he noticed that her lipstick was on crooked, giving her a very different mouth.

“Will you have a little to eat?”

He wasn’t hungry. Only thirsty.

“Sit down...”

She had turned off the gas. The coffee was steaming in the cups. The sandwich on the plate was golden-brown, crusty.

“Was it me who woke you, Monsieur Maigret?”

“I wasn’t asleep.”

“I’m not usually frightened. I never even think of locking my door. But after what happened yesterday, I feel a little less confident...”

She bit into the bread. He swallowed a mouthful of coffee. Then, automatically, he began to fill his pipe. But he had left his matches in his jacket and he got up to fetch the box which was on top of the stove, on the baking-tray.

At first she ate large mouthfuls, like a starving creature, then little by little she began to chew more slowly, occasionally giving Maigret a puzzled glance.

“Is everybody home?” he asked.

“Everybody except Monsieur Fachin, the student, who’s working at a friend’s place. They go shares in the books they have to buy. Each in turn goes to lectures, and then they meet and study together. This gives them time to earn a living. I had one who was a night-watchman in a bank and only slept about three or four hours a day.”

“Do you sleep a lot?”

“That depends. I am more of an eater than a sleeper. What about you?”

The last mouthfuls were becoming more difficult.

“I feel better. Now I shall go and really get some sleep. You don’t need anything?”

“Nothing, thank you.”

“Good night, Monsieur Maigret.”

He climbed back up the stairs. On the first floor, he heard the murmuring of a baby, half asleep, and a regular, measured sound, probably that of the cradle which the mother was rocking from her bed, in the dark, to stop the baby waking up altogether.

This time, in spite of the coffee, he went to sleep straight away, a dreamless sleep which seemed very short. The light wakened him, since he had not closed the curtains, and it was half past five when he went to lean out of the window once again.

The street was even emptier than last night, in the light of morning, and, because of the chill, Maigret had to put on his jacket.

The sky, between the roofs, was a very bright blue, cloudless, and most of the houses looked golden. A police constable on his way to the station walked by, taking long, regular steps, towards the foot of the street.

On the first floor, opposite, the blind had been raised, and Maigret's gaze rested on an untidy bedroom, with a box open near the window. It was an old-fashioned kind of box, practical, well worn, the sort owned by business representatives who travel a lot and take their samples with them.

A middle-aged man was moving about, and, when he bent down, Maigret could see, from above, that his head was balding. He could not see much of the face.

He gave him about fifty-five years, perhaps a little more. Yes, probably a little more. He was fully dressed, in a dark suit. He was finishing putting some white shirts in the top compartment of the case, then lowered the lid, sat on it to shut the lock.

Half the bed was visible, a pillow which still had a hollow in it from the head that had rested there.

For a while the chief-inspector wondered if there might not be someone else in the bed, and the answer was immediately provided by a woman's arm.

The man dragged his trunk away, probably out on to the landing, came back, leant over the bed to kiss the woman. Then he returned again and, this time, took a little box from the drawer in the bedside table, removed two tablets, filled a glass with water and held it out to the invisible person.

He must have made a telephone call, because a taxi came up the street and stopped outside the house. Before leaving, the man closed the curtain, and Maigret saw nothing more until the street door was in due course opened.

The box was heavy, and the taxi-driver got out to help his passenger.

Then came the voices.

"Gare Montparnasse. Quickly."

The door slammed.

A window opened on the opposite side of the street, above Maigret's head, on the third floor, and a woman, her hair in curlers, holding her mauve wrap in place over her chest with one hand, leant out over the narrow cleft of the street.

She noticed the chief-inspector. It was a new face to her, and she showed a certain surprise, took her time to examine him before disappearing into the room.

The only other thing he saw was her hand shaking a duster in the air.

There were movements in the Lotards' flat. A tall, red-haired young man entered the house, and after listening to the sound of his steps Maigret knew that it was Oscar Fachin, the student, who went straight off to bed.

Would Mademoiselle Clément go back to sleep after being woken up by the student's return?

At half past six it was the Safts' turn to get up, and there came a vague smell of coffee from their door.

Mademoiselle Isabelle did not leave her bed until a quarter past seven, and she immediately started running water.

Monsieur Kridelka was still asleep. Monsieur Valentin as well. As for Mademoiselle Blanche, she didn't make a sound and, much later, when the house was empty, she would still be wrapped in her sleep.

Maigret had smoked his third or fourth pipe when he decided to get washed and dressed. Monsieur Lotard left, then Monsieur Saft, whom he saw on the pavement, a worn brief-case under his arm.

He did not want any coffee, but a glass of white wine, and it aroused his thirst to see the Auvergnat take down his shutters, bring out the tables and chairs.

He went downstairs, looked in the direction of the two spy-windows, the one in the bedroom and the other in the kitchen-dining room, but failed to see Mademoiselle Clément. It was

true that the window in the bedroom was screened by a dark curtain. She too was probably at her toilet.

The front door was open, and as he walked through, he met a thin woman, short, dressed entirely in black, who walked in a determined way and entered the living-room as if it belonged to her. She turned round to look at him. As he turned round too, their eyes met, but she did not lower hers, he even imagined that she shrugged her shoulders and muttered something between her teeth. He noticed, without undue surprise, that she was wearing men's shoes.

"A nip of white wine," he ordered from the Auvergnat, whose shirt was the same washed blue as the sky.

"Well. How was it last night? Anybody murdered?"

He saw Mademoiselle Isabelle go by, looking very fresh in a navy suit. He did not take his eyes off the house, and anyone who was used to working with him, like Lucas, or like the unfortunate Janvier, would have realized that an idea was running through his head.

"Do you know where Mademoiselle Clément does her shopping?"

"In the Rue Mouffetard, like everyone else round here. There are shops in the Rue Gay-Lussac, but they're dearer. And the butcher's not too good in the Rue Saint-Jacques."

Maigret drank three glasses of the white wine, which had greenish reflections in it, and then, hands in the pockets of his jacket, he walked slowly down the street as if he already lived in the district. A little old man in front of him was taking his dog for a walk and greeted him as one greets people in the country one doesn't know. Was it perhaps because he looked so much at home here? He returned the greeting, smiling, and a few minutes later he arrived in the narrow Rue Mouffetard, cluttered with small barrows which gave off strong smells of vegetables and fruit.

Pearls of dew still trembled on the cauliflowers and lettuces—or maybe the stall-women had sprinkled them to freshen them up.

He was looking for the delicatessen and found it at once; behind the white marble counter stood a woman with rosy cheeks, her bodice laced high, who still retained a trace of village manners.

He waited to be alone with her, letting two women customers, who had come in on his heels, go in front of him.

“What would you like?”

“Some information. Mademoiselle Clément, in the Rue Lhomond, gets her things from you, doesn’t she?”

“Has done for the last ten years.”

“Is she a good customer?”

“Of course it’s not the same as if she got her lodgers’ meals, as they do in some boarding-houses. But she comes in regularly.”

“She has a large appetite?...” he said, jokingly.

“She likes her food, that’s true enough. Are you living at her house?”

“From yesterday.”

“Is she getting your meals?”

“Now and then.”

She hadn’t bothered to worry about what was behind these questions. Suddenly a thought seemed to strike her.

“From yesterday? Is that all?”

“Yesterday evening...”

“I’d have thought you’d been there a number of days...”

He was opening his mouth to say something more when an old lady came in and he preferred to keep quiet. When he was out again in the Rue Mouffetard, he was feeling gay. He nearly went into a bar to make a telephone call. Then a kind of feeling of loyalty to his Auvergnat made him decide to wait until he was back in the Rue Lhomond; perhaps he also remembered the white wine which left an aftertaste that recalled some country inn.

“Have you a telephone?”

“Behind the door at the back.”

It was nine o'clock in the morning. Time for the conference, at the Quai des Orfèvres. The heads of departments, carrying files under their arms, would be entering the Commissioner's big office, with its broad windows open on to a stretch of the Seine.

“Hallo!... Give me Lucas, please...”

The man on the switchboard had recognized his voice.

“I'll put you through right away, Chief-Inspector.”

Then Lucas:

“Is that you, Chief?”

“Nothing new?”

“Vauquelin is just writing out his report on the job you gave him. I don't think he found out much.”

“Have you any news of Janvier?”

“I just telephoned Cochin. He had a restless night, but the doctor said that was inevitable. His temperature is fine. Are you still at Mademoiselle Clément's? Did you sleep all right?”

There was no mockery in Lucas's voice, but the chief-inspector winced all the same.

“Are you doing anything? Will you get the car and come round to the Rue Lhomond? Stop just a bit down from the house and wait there. There's no hurry. Don't trouble to get here for half an hour.”

Lucas didn't dare ask any questions, and Maigret was sniffing at the smell of cooking in the kitchen where the telephone was situated, pulled a face when he realized it would be mutton again and went to have a last drink at the counter.

When he got back to Mademoiselle Clément's, the woman in men's shoes he had passed as he left was barring his way, head down, her behind in the air, busily swabbing over the tiles in the passage.

There was nobody in the living-room, where everything was now clean and tidy. Mademoiselle Clément was in the kitchen, wearing a light-coloured dress, her face fresh, her expression cheerful.

“You’ve been out for breakfast?” she enquired. “If you’d only asked me, I would have got it for you.”

“Do you often get your lodgers’ meals?”

“Not their meals, really. Sometimes I make them some coffee in the mornings. Or they come down with their little coffee burners and make it themselves.”

“Did you sleep all right, after your snack during the night?”

“Quite well. And you?”

There was something a little aggressive in her good-humour, perhaps a little irritated. Nevertheless Maigret was sure he was behaving in exactly the same manner as on the day before. But she probably had antennae. She was busy peeling potatoes.

“Is that your charlady working in the passage?”

“It’s obviously not somebody who comes along to do that just for fun or just for the exercise.”

“I didn’t see her yesterday.”

“Because she only comes four days a week. She’s got five children and has her own housework to do. Did you speak to her?”

“No. Is she the one who cleans all the rooms?”

“Not all of them. Only on Fridays and Saturdays when she doc«; them out properly.”

“Your room as well?”

“I’m still capable of looking after my own room, wouldn’t you think?”

She was still gay, certainly, but her gaiety was forced, and there was an electric atmosphere.

“I should like to have a look at your room, Mademoiselle Clément.”

“Your detectives looked in it the first day.”

“The time they could not find Paulus in the house?”

“Yes.”

“Would it be too much trouble to show it again to me?”

She shrugged her shoulders, stood up, brushed the peelings from her apron.

“The room hasn’t been cleaned. But since you saw me in my nightdress last night...”

Her throaty laugh.

“Come on...”

She opened the door and went in first. The room was dark, because it looked on to the narrow yard of the building next door. While the sun bathed the front of the house and enlivened everything it touched, here there was a feeling of stillness, of emptiness.

Nevertheless it was a feminine room. The bed was unmade. A pretty dressing-case lay open on the dressing-table, and there were still a few blonde hairs in the comb. A curtain of flowered cretonne hid the basin from view and a strong smell of soap floated in the air.

“Have you seen it?”

Maigret had so far seen that there was no wall cupboard. Disregarding the impropriety of doing so, he pulled aside the toilet curtain, while Mademoiselle Clément heaved a sigh behind his back:

“Now you know what an old spinster’s bedroom looks like...”

On the bedside table there was a cup with coffee dregs in it and, in the saucer, the crumbs from a croissant.

“You bring yourself breakfast in bed?”

Maigret's eyes were laughing now, as he watched the enormous baby, whose face was beginning to show alarm.

"You are charming, Mademoiselle Clément. It would really upset me to cause you any embarrassment, but I feel obliged to look under your bed."

He didn't have time to bend down. From underneath the bed appeared a pair of men's shoes, trousers, arms, and then an extremely pale face with the pupils glowing with terror.

"Get up, Paulus. Don't be scared. I shan't hurt you."

The young man was trembling. When he opened his mouth, it was to mutter, with his throat constricted:

"She didn't know."

"What didn't she know?"

"That I was hiding under the bed."

Maigret laughed. He was in as playful a mood as suited this spring morning.

"You shave when she's out then?" he asked, because the youth's face showed no sign of a four-day beard.

"I swear..."

"Listen, Monsieur Maigret..." Mademoiselle Clément began.

She was laughing now. She managed to laugh and she probably didn't take the adventure so very tragically, if the truth were known.

"I deceived you, I know. But it didn't come about as you might think. He wasn't the one who shot the inspector."

"Were you with him at the time?"

"Yes."

"In the bed?"

"I might have guessed you'd say that. Everybody simply must see the worst in everything. If he did sometimes sleep in my bed, I promise you it wasn't when I was in it."

“That’s right...” interrupted Paulus.

“It was not my idea, whatever you may think, to get him into this room. I was frightened enough, that evening, when I heard a slight sound coming from under my bed.”

Maigret now began to treat Paulus in a more familiar manner; in a way he did this to show the boy that he was under arrest.

“So you were upstairs when the detectives arrived, were you, mv lad?”

“Yes. I was expecting something of the sort. I was scared stiff. I saw them from the window. As the house has only one exit, I climbed up to the attic”

“Didn’t they search the attic?”

“Yes, they did. I’d had time to get out on to the roof. I stayed there most of the day, pressed against a chimney.”

“Did you get dizzy?”

“Yes. When I thought there was no longer any danger, I went back inside the house through the skylight and came downstairs without making a sound.”

“You didn’t think of getting away?”

“Of course. But I guessed there’d be some policeman left outside in the street.”

He was not an ugly boy, a little thin, a little too nervous, and he had an abrupt way of speaking. Sometimes the words came out so jerkily that one would have thought his jaw was shaking.

Nevertheless he was much less frightened than one might have supposed. He even seemed to be relaxing. It was probably a relief for him, after all, to have been caught.

“So you went off and hid in Mademoiselle Clément’s room?”

“I had no idea it would be for so long as this. I imagined that I’d soon have the chance to escape.”

“And she caught you?”

“I must have moved without knowing it. I was asleep. I swore to myself that I wouldn’t go off to sleep, but I did all the same.”

It was curious to look at them both together; he long-legged like a young deer, she fat and placid like a provincial aunt.

It would have been even funnier to have witnessed the scene which must have taken place that night. Had Mademoiselle Clément been quite as surprised as she tried to make out?

He had probably wept and she no doubt had comforted him. She had gone and found him something to eat and drink. Almost certainly, she would have given him a small glass of chartreuse.

They had been living, since then, that’s to say for five days, in the same room, with one bed, where they must have taken it in turns to sleep. For Maigret believed them on that score.

From morning till evening young Paulus had gazed at the springs in the mattress, jumping at the slightest sound. He had heard the detectives coming and going, Maigret, the questions and answers.

Because of the continuous watch being kept, Mademoiselle Clément had been obliged to get up during the night to give him something to eat.

Maigret smiled as he thought of the enormous sandwich he had forced her to consume at half past two in the morning, when she was not at all hungry.

A car drew up not far from the house, one of the Headquarters cars, in which Lucas, following his instructions, was waiting patiently beside the driver.

“What are you going to do?” asked Mademoiselle Clément, who had also heard the car. “Are you going to arrest me?”

She gazed around, woebegone, at her walls, at her furniture, her house from which she thought she would now be parted.

“Not right away,” he said. “It all depends. Come with me, young man. You can bring your tooth-brush and comb with

you.”

“My parents will find out, I suppose?”

“They’re bound to have heard yesterday from the newspapers.”

“What did my father say?”

“I haven’t seen him yet. More than likely, he caught the Paris train last night.”

“I’d sooner not have to meet him.”

“I can see that! Come on.”

The boy hesitated, pointed at Mademoiselle Clément.

“Honestly it’s not her fault, you know; She’s been...”

He hunted for the word, couldn’t find it.

“She’s been...”

“Charming, I know. You can tell me all about it at the Quai des Orfèvres.”

They went out through the kitchen, through the living-room where Maigret had spent the evening tête-à-tête with the fat girl. From the stone threshold, he made a sign to Lucas.

And he, seeing the young man, let out a little whistle of admiration.

He obviously thought the case was over.

It was only beginning.

Chapter IV

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In the small Headquarters car, Maigret had not once ceased to watch young Paulus out of the corner of his eye, and Lucas, who was studying his chief, noticed he wore a curious expression.

They had not put handcuffs on the boy. He was looking eagerly out of the window and was no longer scared, he no longer trembled as he had when he emerged from under Mademoiselle Clément's bed. At one point he made the most unexpected remark Lucas had ever heard from somebody who had just been arrested. The car had turned into the Boulevard Saint-Michel and was passing a municipal fountain.

A little farther on, between a glove shop and a cinema, they saw a tobacconist's red sign gleaming in the sunlight.

Behaving just like a schoolboy raising his hand to ask to be excused, Paulus said:

"Couldn't we stop a moment so I could buy some cigarettes?"

It was not a trick whereby to get away from them. That would have been too naïve. Without sign of alarm, without taking his big dreamy eyes off him, Maigret had replied:

"I've got some in my office."

The chief-inspector had settled down there with obvious pleasure, the same kind of pleasure the boy had shown at life going on in the sunlit streets.

"Sit down."

He had taken time to read the mail which was waiting for him, to give some instructions on current cases. He had opened the window, filled his pipe, handed a packet of cigarettes to his young companion.

"Now, start talking."

“You know it wasn’t me who shot the inspector. I promise you. In any case I haven’t got a revolver. The one I used at “The Stork”, was a toy gun.”

“I know.”

“You do believe me, don’t you? I never left Mademoiselle Clément’s room. Why should I have tried to kill a policeman?”

“Didn’t you want to get out of the house?”

“Not in the slightest.”

He said this so quickly, with such earnestness, that it was almost comic.

“Where would I have gone to? Since the police had come to the Rue Lhomond, they knew who I was. So they were on the hunt for me. So, once outside, they would have got me in the end.”

“Was it your idea or Mademoiselle Clément’s?”

“Mine. I begged her to keep me there, promising I’d be good and not look at her as she got undressed.”

“Didn’t you look at her?”

“A bit.”

“Did you reckon on staying long in that room?”

“Until the police had given up worrying about me.”

“Where would you have gone?”

“Maybe to look for...”

He bit his lip, blushed.

“Go on...”

“I don’t want to.”

“Why not?”

“Because I mustn’t give the game away.”

“You don’t want to reveal your accomplice’s name? That was who you thought you’d go and join?”

“Yes. But I’m no squealer.”

“You’d rather take all the blame, even though you are the less guilty of the two?”

“I’m not the less guilty.”

Maigret had had dozens of youngsters of this age in his office, who had all done more or less the same thing, for the same reasons; boys who had, almost always foolishly, got on the wrong side of the law in order to obtain money.

It was the first time he had come across one like Paulus. Some of them, almost from the moment of their arrest, would break down, beg, weep, talk of their parents, sometimes sincerely, at other times with sidelong glances to see what effect they were making.

The majority were nervous, on edge, cocky. A lot of them poured out their resentment and attacked society in general.

Paulus, on the other hand, sat still like a good boy. He was puffing gently at his cigarette, self-contained, only giving a start whenever someone knocked on the door, thinking each time that it was his father, of whom he seemed more scared than of prison.

“Who thought up the raid in the Rue Campagne-Première?”

“We both did.”

“But you were the one who knew “The Stork”?”

“Yes. I went there by chance for the first time a few weeks ago.”

“Did you often go to night-clubs?”

“When I had the money.”

“Was it you who also thought of the toy gun?”

“Jef...”

He’d been caught out. He blushed again, then smiled.

“I know you’ll make me say something I don’t mean to in the end.”

“Then you may as well spill the beans right away.”

“Can you be extradited from Belgium?”

“That depends on the crime.”

“But we haven’t committed any crime!”

“In law, it would be called a crime.”

“Why, if I didn’t fire a shot, and couldn’t have done, even if I’d wanted to?”

“Go on, Paulus. If your pal were here, I’m pretty certain he’d soon land you in the soup.”

“You’re right there.”

“What’s his name?”

“Jef Van Damme; he’s a Belgian. Now you know. He’s been a waiter in a café.”

“How old?”

“Twenty-five. He’s married. He got married almost the moment he arrived in Paris, three years ago, after he’d done his national service. In those days he worked in a restaurant in the Boulevard de Strasbourg and he married a model. They’ve got a child, a little boy.”

He was relaxed now. He’d come to the end of his cigarette, so he asked for another.

“Where did you meet him?”

“In a bar, near Les Halles.”

“A long time ago?”

“Nearly a year.”

“Was he a waiter then?”

“He had no regular job. Every now and then he filled in for someone. He was very poor.”

“Have you his address?”

“I suppose you haven’t got anything on his wife? I can tell you now that she’s in the dark about all this. I’ll explain it all and you’ll see. Her name’s Juliette. She’s not well, always got something wrong with her. Jef often said he didn’t know why

he married her, that he wasn't going to spend the rest of his life with her, and that he wasn't sure the child was really his."

"Their address?"

"Rue Saint-Louis-en-l'Ile, 27a, at the back of a yard, on the third floor."

Maigret, who had jotted down the address on a scrap of paper, went through into the next office to give Lucas some instructions.

"Everything all right, chief?"

He shrugged his shoulders. It was almost too easy.

"Right! Let's get back to Jef and Juliette. You were saying?"

"Have you sent a detective to see her?"

Maigret nodded.

"You'll soon confirm that I've not been lying, that he's not there and his wife knows nothing. Only, if you pass on to her what I've just told you, it will upset her, and she's a decent girl."

"Have you been to bed with her?"

"It just happened."

"Did Jef know?"

"Maybe. It's always hard to tell with him. He's a lot older than me, you see. He's travelled a lot. When he was seventeen, he was a steward on a liner and he's been round the world."

"Was he intending to leave Juliette?"

"Yes. And he'd had enough of Paris. His ambition was to go to America. That's why he wanted the money. I needed money too."

"To do what?"

"I couldn't go on starving."

He pronounced these words with a disarming simplicity. He was thin, underfed, with irregular features, but there was something attractive about his eyes.

“Have you committed other thefts between the two of you?”

“Once.”

“How long ago?”

“It was when I lived with them.”

“You lived with the Van Dammes?”

“For two months. At first, when I arrived in Paris and was working in the Boulevard Saint-Denis, I had a room in a hotel in the Rue Rambuteau. Then I got the sack.”

“Because you pinched money from the petty cash?”

“How did you know that?”

“What did you do next?”

“I looked around for a job. Wherever I went they asked me if I’d done my national service. Nobody wanted to hire a boy just for a few months. At nights, I lugged vegetables around Les Halles. I’ve been a sandwich-board man. My parents used to send me a little money, not enough, and I didn’t dare admit to them that I was out of work, or they would have made me go back to Limoges.”

“Why didn’t you go back to Limoges?”

“Because it’s no sort of life there.”

“While the life you led here was?”

“I could always hope for something to happen. I owed two months’ rent and they were just about to throw me out, when I met Jef. He let me sleep at his place, on a divan.”

“Tell me about the first theft. Whose idea was it?”

“It was his. I didn’t know such things happened. We were both in a café together. A middle-aged man started staring at me hard, I didn’t understand why. He looked like some businessman or the owner of a big shop in the provinces.

“Jef told me that the man would be sure to make a pass at me as soon as I was left alone, and that I only had to let him talk. See what I’m getting at?”

“I see only too well.”

“Once in his room, I should threaten to call for help, and he would offer me money to keep my mouth shut.”

“Is that what did happen?”

“Yes.”

“You didn’t try it on again?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. Maybe because I was too scared. And anyway it all seemed a bit dirty.”

“No other reasons?”

“A few days later, I saw the man with a middle-aged woman, probably his wife, and he gave me a pathetic look.”

“You and Jef shared the proceeds?”

“Naturally. He was the one who put me up to it.”

“And Juliette?”

“I don’t know. I think he would have liked to send her out on the streets. She didn’t want to. They quarrel all the time. He often left me alone with her. She used to undress in front of me, even when he was there. They didn’t find my presence at all embarrassing.”

“And that’s how it happened?”

“Yes. Almost without my knowing it. I didn’t have many other opportunities, for lack of money.”

“What was Van Damme living on?”

“He never let on to me what he was up to. He hung around the low bars near the Porte Saint-Denis. He often went to the races. Sometimes he had money to spend, other times not.”

“Did he trust you?”

“He thought I was too innocent.”

“Why did you leave their place?”

“Because I couldn’t stay there for ever, especially after what happened with Juliette. I tried all the jobs I saw advertised. I began selling encyclopaedias. I did fairly well at it to start with and took a room at Mademoiselle Clément’s.”

“Who gave you her address?”

“It was just by chance, when I was going from door to door with my books; I saw her notice up. I went in and she seemed to take to me from the start.”

“Did she buy an encyclopaedia?”

“No. She showed me the vacant room and that very evening I moved in. She’s always been kind to me. She’s a nice person. She’s kind to everybody. I owe her three months’ rent and she hasn’t turned me out. Just the opposite; you know what she did for me.”

“There’s been nothing going on between you?”

“Never, on my word of honour.”

“Didn’t you try?”

Paulus looked at him, sincerely astonished.

“She’s over forty!”

“We know that! You’ve told her everything you’ve just been saying to me?”

“Not everything.”

“Van Damme and Juliette?”

“Yes. But not the business with the man up from the provinces. Van Damme sometimes came to see me and he occasionally slept in my room, days when he’d been quarrelling with his wife. We were both trying to think up some way of making a lot of money at one swipe.”

“Why?”

“I’ve already told you. Jef wanted to go back to Belgium and get his papers to go to the States from there.”

“Leaving his wife and child?”

“Yes. As for me, I reckoned that I’d soon find some clever racket if only I had a bit of ready money.”

“Didn’t you also rather want to have money to spend on women?”

“That’d be all right, naturally.”

“Did you know that it was through a girl you met one evening at “The Stork” that we tracked you down?”

“I’m not surprised. She wasn’t much fun. She was in too much of a hurry to get me outside and, afterwards, she rushed off to another bar which was still open, in the hope of finding a better customer.”

He said all this without rancour, but there was perhaps a touch of bitterness. He went on, of his own accord:

“Jef and I had read in the papers about a hold-up which they said had raked in three million francs. Some young masked men had attacked a bank messenger. The paper explained how it was there was practically no chance of catching them.”

“Did you think of trying a bank messenger?”

“Not seriously, since they’re almost always armed. But I remembered “The Stork”; the cashier’s desk there is near the door, and after two o’clock in the morning, the place is nearly empty.”

“Who got hold of the car?”

“Jef. I can’t drive.”

“He stole it?”

“He pinched it from the corner of the road, and afterwards we abandoned it a few streets away.”

“Did Jef possess a revolver?”

Paulus did not hesitate.

“Yes.”

“Do you know its make?”

“I’ve often seen it at his home. It’s a small automatic, made in Belgium, at the Herstal state armaments factory.”

“He didn’t have another one?”

“I’m sure he didn’t.”

“You never considered using it for the raid on “The Stork”?”

“I was against it.”

“For what reason?”

“So that it wouldn’t be so serious if we got nabbed.”

Maigret picked up the internal telephone, which had just rung. It was Lucas, to say that he was back from the Ile Saint-Louis, and Maigret, looking Paulus in the eyes, asked the latter:

“You’re not likely to try and run away?”

“What would be the use?”

He left him alone in his office while he went in to see Lucas.

“Van Damme?” he asked.

“He disappeared five days ago. His wife doesn’t know what’s become of him. She’s been expecting him to leave her for some time now. Things weren’t going too well between them. They’ve got a baby.”

“What’s she like?”

“A perky little thing, the kind you see everywhere. She looked tubercular to me.”

“Has she any money?”

“Not a penny.”

“How is she living then?”

Maigret comprehended Lucas’s look and sigh.

“Nothing found in the flat?”

Lucas laid a Belgian automatic on the desk. Paulus had not lied. It was plainly not the weapon with which Janvier had been shot. If Van Damme had not taken it with him, it was

because he was counting on crossing the frontier, where he would run the risk of being searched.

“She hasn’t the least idea where he might be?”

“She thinks he’s gone back to Belgium. He talked about it quite a lot. He felt a bit lost in Paris, where people made fun of his accent.”

Lucas produced a passport photograph, showing a fair-haired man, with an almost rectangular face and jutting jaw, who gazed fixedly in front of him like a soldier on duty. He looked more like a gangster from La Villette than a waiter.

“Send a copy of it to the Belgian police. They’ll probably find him hanging around the American consulate.”

“What did the lad say?”

“The lot.”

“Was it him?”

“He didn’t shoot Janvier.”

“His father’s just arrived and is waiting outside.”

“What sort of a man?”

“Clerk, or cashier. What shall I do with him?”

“Let him wait.”

Maigret went back in his office, where he found Paulus leaning out of the window.

“Can I take another cigarette? You wouldn’t have a glass of water?”

“Sit down. Your father’s here.”

“Are you going to make me see him?”

And, for all that he had been so calm until then, there was a look of panic in his eyes.

“You’re scared of him? Is he strict?”

“No. It’s not that.”

“What then?”

“He won’t understand. It’s not his fault. He’s bound to be upset and... Please, Chief-Inspector!... Don’t bring him in now...”

“You know what’s waiting for you?”

“I’ll be put in prison.”

“For how long?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t killed anyone. It was a toy revolver. I haven’t even spent my share of the money. You must have found it by now.”

He had said it quite naturally: “my share”.

“You’ll be lucky if you get away with less than five years. And, after that, you’ll be sent off to the regiments in Africa.”

This did not dishearten him. He was only thinking of the unpleasantness of the meeting with his father.

He was not out to win pity. He did not understand why Maigret, who was childless, who had always so much wanted a son, was looking at him in some distress.

What sort of a man would he be, with what hopes for the future, when they released him from serving in Africa—if he ever got out?

“What an idiot you are, Paulus!” sighed the chief-inspector. “If I thought your father would give you a thorough thrashing, I’d fetch him in this minute.”

“He’s never hit me in my life.”

“Pity.”

“He starts crying. That’s worse!”

“I’m going to send you to the Depot. Do you know any lawyers?”

“No.”

“I expect your father will appoint one for you. Come this way...”

“We shan’t meet him?”

“No. Put your cigarette out.”

And Maigret handed him over to Lucas, who dealt with the formalities.

The half-hour with the father was still more disagreeable. As Paulus had foreseen, he wept. And Maigret, also, could not bear to see a man weeping.

“We’ve done everything for him, Chief-Inspector...”

But of course! Maigret was not blaming anyone. Everybody did his best. Unfortunately, people could not do very much. Otherwise Police Headquarters would probably not have come into being.

The fact remained that Janvier had been shabbily shot on the pavement in the Rue Lhomond, and that it was up to the chief-inspector to find his assailant.

To take his mind off everything, he went with Lucas to lunch at the Brasserie Dauphine, where they sat on the terrace, at a table covered with a red check cloth. It was the first time this year that he had eaten out of doors. He was distracted, preoccupied. Lucas sensed this and hardly spoke, hesitated before asking a question.

“You’re sure those two have nothing to do with the Janvier case, Chief?”

“Positive. You’ll see, they’ll pick up Van Damme in Brussels; he’ll have run off there the moment he had the money in his pocket. Whereas Paulus, after the robbery, went to earth in the Rue Lhomond house, and nothing in the world would have brought him out. He felt safe with Mademoiselle Clément. He’d have stayed there for months if he’d been allowed to. He could only have had one reason for shooting Janvier: to make the way clear for his escape. But he didn’t escape. And I believe Mademoiselle Clément when she asserts that he was under the bed at the time the shot was fired and that she was in the room.”

“What now?”

“Nothing. I’ve just been through Janvier’s desk once again. I examined the smallest scraps of paper, re-read the dossiers of

all the cases he's been engaged on recently. It could have been someone taking his revenge."

But still! It's very seldom that a criminal revenges himself on a policeman, even the one who got him arrested. Yet the chief-inspector was anxious not to neglect any possibility.

"I also got hold of the list of all those who have recently been released from prison. There isn't a single one who was arrested by Janvier or through his agency."

"Are you thinking of going back over there?"

"Over there" plainly meant Mademoiselle Clément's house.

Maigret did not reply straight away. He ate in silence, watching the shadows of people passing by on the pavement.

"Who knew Janvier would be on duty that night, in the Rue Lhomond?"

He put the question to himself. But it was Lucas who replied.

"I didn't even know myself," he said. "He worked it out to suit himself with Vauquelin and the other inspectors."

"It's hard to believe that someone could have gone up the Rue Lhomond by chance, recognized Janvier and, for some reason or other, shot him down. Whoever it was could not have approached so silently that Janvier didn't even hear him coming."

"I'm beginning to see what you're driving at."

"It wasn't Janvier in person they were after, that's the point. *It was the inspector who was on pavement duty, that evening, in the Rue Lhomond.* Vauquelin, or any of the others, might just as well have been shot."

"Unless they took Janvier for someone else?"

Maigret shrugged his shoulders. He debated whether to have a liqueur with his coffee, eventually ordered a calvados, as a protest against the chartreuse he had drunk the night before.

"I'm going round to see Janvier. Possibly the doctor will let him talk now."

“Can I come with you? I’d like to say hello to him.”

They went there together. Madame Janvier had not yet arrived. They hadn’t long to wait. This time the inspector had grown almost a proper beard, and his eyes were brighter.

“Don’t over-excite him. The doctor says he can talk for a bit, quietly, but he must keep calm.”

Maigret sat down astride a chair, his pipe unlit in his mouth, while Lucas leant against the window-sill.

“We’ve arrested Paulus. Don’t you say anything. I’ll tell you what it was in one sentence. He was hiding under Mademoiselle Clément’s bed.”

And, as Janvier’s face seemed to take on a crest-fallen look, Maigret added:

“Don’t get worried. I’d never have dreamt of looking under that woman’s bed either. Paulus is just a novice. It was neither he nor his accomplice, a Belgian who has skedaddled, who fired at you. Don’t move. Don’t say anything. Just let me ask you a few questions and take time to think about the answers.”

Janvier signified that he understood.

“I’ve thought of one possibility, though I don’t set much store by it. Supposing that you’d got hold of a clue, either in this or some other case, which might have led suspicion to fall on somebody, that somebody might have decided to get rid of you.”

Janvier lay motionless for some time.

“I can’t think of anything,” he said finally.

“You had done several spells outside the house. Did you notice anything unusual?”

“Nothing that’s not in my report.”

Madame Janvier’s visit was announced. This time, she was certainly entitled to spend a few minutes alone with her husband. She saw Maigret and was embarrassed by the bunch of violets she held in her hand.

“Don’t you worry, my lad. We’ll be sure to find him in the end.”

Once outside with Lucas, he seemed less optimistic.

“Someone shot at Janvier. That’s a fact. The bullet didn’t fire itself and the bastard who pressed the trigger must be somewhere.”

“Do you think he’s still in the Rue Lhomond?”

Maigret did not think anything at all. He no longer knew. He was in a bad temper, and the spring weather no longer gave him any feeling of pleasure.

“You may as well go back to the Quai. If there’s any news, telephone me.”

“At Mademoiselle Clément’s?”

At moments like this the chief-inspector was understandably a little more touchy than usual. He gave Lucas a nasty look, as if he suspected him of mockery.

“Yes, at Mademoiselle Clément’s!”

And, filling his pipe, he went off heavily towards the Rue Lhomond.

“I was wondering if you were going to come back.”

“Well! I’m back.”

“Have you put him in prison?”

“Certainly.”

“Are you cross?”

“Who with?”

“With me.”

She did not yet fully understand either. There she stood, more like a doll than ever, smiling at him timidly, but that was the limit of her apprehension.

“You realize what you’ve done?”

“I don’t think he’s a bad boy. He’s all right at heart.”

“Nonetheless I ought to charge you with harbouring a criminal.”

“Is that what you’re going to do?”

One might think she found it amusing, that she rather looked forward to going to prison, too, as others look forward to going to Nice.

“I can’t say yet.”

“Why don’t you sit down?”

Indeed he had no good reason to remain standing in the living-room. It was silly. But he was annoyed with the big fat girl, without exactly knowing why. He was sulking.

“Are you still hiding something from me?”

“I can assure you that there’s nobody under my bed now, if that’s what you mean. Nor in the cupboards. You can search the house.”

“Are you making fun of me, Mademoiselle Clément?”

“I would never allow myself to do that, Monsieur Maigret.”

“Then why are you smiling?”

“Because I find life amusing.”

“And what if my inspector had been killed, would that have been amusing too? He has a wife, two children, and a third on the way.”

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

“What were you thinking of?”

“Of you.”

He could find nothing to answer. She was quite as frank, in her way, as that little scamp Paulus.

“Are you going upstairs?”

“Yes.”

“Wouldn’t you like a cup of coffee?”

“No, thanks.”

But he did not go up straight away, and, remembering his thirst the night before, he went across to the bistro opposite, where he drank three glasses of beer one after the other, with the feeling that he was getting his own back.

“Have you found him yet?” asked the Auvergnat.

Maigret shot straight back at him:

“Who?”

And the man preferred to drop the subject.

It was just an ordinary stretch of street, with almost no passers-by, a pair of pavements, some houses, a few hundred people living in the houses, men who set out in the morning and came back in the evening, women who did their housekeeping, children squealing, old people enjoying the fresh air at their windows or on their doorsteps.

There were a fat girl with a babyish expression who played at running a boarding-house, a pathetic old duffer who gave singing-lessons to opera-mad girls, a starving student who fought grimly against sleep in the hope of one day putting up a doctor's or dentist's plate on his door; there were a lazy little whore who spent the whole day reading novels in bed, where she entertained an elderly gentleman three times a week, and a young typist who was brought home every night in a taxi; there were the Lotards and their baby, the Safts who were expecting one; Monsieur Kridelka, who looked like a screen villain, but who was probably the gentlest person in the world. There were...

Charming people, as Mademoiselle Clément would say. The sort of people you meet all over the place, who had to find enough money every day to eat, and enough money every month to pay their rent.

There were the neighbours: a man who had left home that morning with a commercial traveller's box, a woman who shook her duster out of the window, and someone, right at the top, under the roof, who kept the light on late into the night.

What would they have found, if the street had been gone through with a fine-tooth comb? A majority of what are called

decent people, probably. No rich ones. A few poor ones. A few semi-scoundrels too, no doubt.

But the murderer?

The Auvergnat narrowed his bushy eyebrows as he heard Maigret, still holding his glass of beer in his hand, order casually:

“A glass of white wine.”

Perhaps he was forgetting he had just drunk three glasses of beer? Perhaps he considered that they did not count, that they just made up for last night? Perhaps, after all, he was just thinking of something else?

The *patron* chose to say nothing, hastily seized hold of the bottle and filled a long-stemmed glass.

When the chief-inspector crossed the street a little later, he watched him going, shook his head and muttered:

“That’s a strange one!”

For each of us is strange to somebody or other.

Chapter V

« ^ »

She must have done it deliberately. It was her own way of waging a curious little warfare. Despite her surprising lightness for her size, there was still no need for her to climb up two flights, when she might just as well have called him from the bottom of the staircase.

Was it to rub in the fact that he was a heavy sleeper? Perhaps he was, in the mornings. Madame Maigret, too, teased him about it. But it was not true when he dozed off during the day. Anyway, after knocking on the door, she opened it at once, to find him fully dressed on his bed.

“Please forgive me. I thought you were busy working. You’re wanted on the telephone.”

She bore no ill-feeling. Far from it. She looked at him, her eyes sparkling with good-will, and even affection.

It was something that only concerned the two of them; others would not have understood. Maigret was cross with her. That was a fact. It had been going on for more than two days. A dozen times a day, at least, he would leave the house and then come back again. Each time she would contrive to be there, with an odd little look, as if to say:

“Are we friends again?”

Either he pretended not to see her, or he replied to her advances with a grunt.

For the past two days also, it had been raining, with an occasional gleam of sunshine piercing the clouds.

“Hallo. Yes it’s me...”

“Do you remember someone called Meyer, Chief?”

He was sure she was listening, from the living-room or the kitchen, and it was probably for her benefit that he answered, grumpily:

“There must be ten pages of Meyers in the telephone directory.”

“He’s the cashier from the Boulevard des Italiens; he’s cleared off. We’ve just had news of him. The Dutch police have picked him up in Amsterdam, with a red-haired girl. What do we do now?”

It was as if, too, he were deliberately keeping away from the Quai des Orfèvres. The house in the Rue Lhomond had become a kind of annex of Police Headquarters, and it even came to the point that the Commissioner of Police himself had to call the chief-inspector there.

“Is that you, Maigret? The examining magistrate has given me a ring about the Piercot case...”

And hardly had he hung up before Maigret seemed to sink back again voluptuously into the atmosphere of his little back-street.

The charwoman in men’s shoes was scared of him, heaven knows why, and hastily withdrew out of his way when she heard him coming. The others also regarded him with some embarrassment, one might say even some anxiety, as if they felt that for two pins suspicion might fall on them.

In fact it was only Mademoiselle Clément who refused to take him seriously, but smiled at him as if she were sure that sooner or later he would drop his mask.

Without making a show of it, she paid him numerous little attentions. In the morning, she took it upon herself to place a cup of coffee outside his door as soon as she heard him getting up. In the evening, there was always a bottle of beer on the table in the little living-room, where he would eventually look in on some pretext or other.

If he had been asked what he was doing there he would probably have replied that he had no idea, that he was floundering, and that he had almost had enough of it; while Madame Maigret, on the telephone—for she was still in Alsace—adopted an attitude similar to Mademoiselle Clément’s.

One unusual thing was that he had made lots of notes. Whenever he interrogated someone, he drew his big black notebook from his pocket, a notebook fastened with an elastic band, and he wrote down what he was told.

Later, in his room, when he was tired of looking out of his window, he would sit down at his table and copy out his notes. He realized it would probably serve no purpose. It was a kind of discipline, or perhaps a way of punishing himself, for some God-forsaken reason.

Whenever a curtain moved in one of the houses opposite, he would get up and go to stand at the window, which he had to keep closed, for the rain had so lowered the temperature that it was almost cold enough for a fire.

EUGÈNE LOTARD—32, *born at Saint-Étienne. Son of a railwayman. Insurance agent with the National. Married three years ago Mlle Rosalie Mêchin, born at Bénouville, near Étretat (Seine-Inférieure).*

BLANCHE DUBUT—22, *born at La Châtaigneraie (Vendée). Stage artiste. Single.*

It was all boringly pointless. These people had come to Paris from all over France, and even from all over Europe, and had settled in Mademoiselle Clément's house.

Kridelka was waiting for his naturalization papers, although he spoke atrocious French. Saft had his already.

He had interrogated them all, some of them several times over. He had been in their rooms, had seen their beds, their toothbrushes above the basins, and the little spirit or petrol cookers on which they made most of their meals.

He had come to know the most intimate details of their lives, as he watched them with his big eyes, which at such moments took on a look of gloom.

And what besides? Nowhere, of course, not in the cupboards, nor on top of the furniture, nor under the mattresses, had he found the Colt revolver which someone had used to shoot Janvier.

Poor Janvier! Maigret had even given up going to the hospital to see him, merely telephoned twice a day to the nurse, and sometimes he was put through to the wounded man, who would say a few words in a voice he did not recognize. How much longer would he speak with that awful whistling sound?

Faces he had never seen three days before had become so familiar to him that, later on, he would probably nod to them in the street, mistaking them for friends.

The woman with the duster, for instance, watched his window almost as often as he watched hers, with a look of reproach as if to convey to him that a big, strong-looking man like himself ought to be engaged on some more worthwhile occupation.

She was a widow, Madame Boulard, whose husband had been employed by the Ministry of Transport, and she had a small pension.

In a block of six houses, he had already come across five widows. He saw them go out each morning, carrying their shopping-baskets on their arms, to the market in the Rue Mouffetard. He saw them return, their bags overflowing with leeks or lettuces.

He would almost have been able to tell what everybody round here ate and at what times, when and how they went to bed, at what times, too, their alarm-clocks began ringing beside their beds.

On the first floor opposite, the bed had been slightly moved, so as to bring it nearer the window. It was the room from which a man had left one morning with a large suitcase to take a taxi to the Gare Montparnasse.

Often, at odd hours of the night, the light would be switched on, but he could see no other shadow against the blind.

The woman was ill. She stayed in bed all day. The concierge would go up about ten o'clock each morning, open the window and start cleaning.

Behind the attic window lived the maid of a well-to-do old woman— another widow; she lived in, and men visited her there every night.

He had taken up Vauquelin's work where it had been left off, he had been to interrogate everyone, all the neighbours, all those who might have seen or heard something. To do this, he was obliged to knock at their doors at meal-times, or in the evening after dinner. Some of them he had interviewed twice over.

"I've told the inspector all I know already," they would say to him.

Nonetheless he would sit down, invited or not. It was an old trick. When people see you sitting down, they give up hope of getting rid of you in a few minutes and try to help you.

"What were you doing at ten o'clock last Monday evening?"

He would add:

"The evening a shot was fired in the street."

They would be impressed by his big notebook. Most of them searched their memories.

"I was getting ready for bed."

"Were your windows shut?"

"I think so... Wait a minute..."

"It was quite warm."

"If I remember rightly, one of the windows was half open."

His work certainly required patience. He took Vauquelin's notes with him. Sometimes they agreed, sometimes not.

Three times, he had started to draw up a kind of timetable, which he had to amend continually.

Or else he would go and drink a glass of white wine or have a snack at the Auvergnat's bar, where he came to know all the regulars. They treated him now as an old customer. Each morning he was informed what the meals would be, and the

wife, who wore her hair in a tight bun on the top of her head, would add:

“Unless there’s something special you fancy...”

More often than not, he didn’t bother to put on his overcoat. He would turn up the collar of his jacket, lower the brim of his hat and bunch his shoulders as he crossed the street. At the homes of some of the women he went to question like this, they would look at his shoes meaningfully, as if to remind him to wipe his feet.

“You’re sure you didn’t hear any footsteps?”

His final résumé, drawn up at four o’clock on Friday afternoon, when he got back from having a drink at the Auvergnat’s, was roughly as follows. He had read it through so often, his pencil in his hand, that there were doodlings all over it, as in the margin of a schoolboy’s exercise book.

Mlle Clément’s house. Twenty past ten (a few seconds before the shot).

Mlle Clément is in her room, getting ready for bed, and Paulus is under her bed.

On the ground floor, on the left, M. Valentin is making himself a hot drink in his kitchen, as he does almost every evening.

On the first floor, the Lotards are in bed. Mme Lotard has not yet gone to sleep, since the baby has just begun whimpering, and she is waiting to see if she will have to get up.

Blanche Dubut is reading in bed.

Fachin out (studying at a friend’s place; won’t be back till morning).

M. Mège, clerk, whose window, like Fachin’s, looks on to the yard, sitting on his bed cutting his toenails.

Second floor. No one in Paulus’s room. Kridelka out. Will be in a quarter of an hour later. Has gone to a public meeting. [Checked by Inspector Vacher.]

Mlle Isabelle out. (Cinema, impossible to check. Repeats quite confidently the story of the film she is supposed to have been to see.)

M. and Mme Saft. She in bed. He busy reading a newspaper in an armchair.

Similar pages summarized the activities of the inhabitants of the neighbouring houses.

Then, finally, on a separate sheet, there was as precise a reconstruction as possible of everybody's movements at the time of the shot and immediately afterwards.

This one, especially, differed noticeably from Vauquelin's report, probably because the people concerned had had time to remember.

One fact seemed certain: nobody had heard footsteps before the firing of the shot.

"You didn't hear the inspector's footsteps?"

"No. I saw him a little earlier on, as I was closing my window. I didn't realize he was a detective, and, as he looked quite young, I thought he was waiting for his girl-friend."

That was the woman with the duster.

Monsieur Valentin too had noticed Janvier, as he closed his window, before going into his kitchen, but that was about ten o'clock. He didn't wonder what he was doing there.

Then the shot rang out in the silence of the deserted street.

Blanche Dubut, it seemed, was the first to rush to her window, which was half open, but the curtains were closed. She had pulled them apart.

"Did you see lights on in any of the other windows?"

"I have a feeling there was one on in the window opposite. It nearly always is at that time; but I looked down at the street first."

The window opposite belonged to the flat from which a man had left with his travelling-case, and where there lived a woman who was ill or crippled.

“Were there any other windows open?”

“Yes. Almost all of them.”

“Were they open before you opened yours?”

“I don’t think so. I’m pretty sure I was the first to see the body on the pavement and call the alarm.”

That was true. Four people at least had heard her scream, including Monsieur Saft, who had rushed out on to the landing, thinking she was calling for help.

“Who went out into the street first?”

In all probability, it was Monsieur Valentin, wearing his black velvet smoking-jacket. The concierge of the next-door house had emerged from her lodge at almost the same moment.

Maigret had asked the same question a hundred times:

“In which windows were there lights on then?”

But thereupon everything became muddled. Most of the windows were in fact opened one after the other. Mademoiselle Clément did not even leave her threshold. She had asked:

“Is he wounded?”

And, not losing a moment, she had rushed off to telephone the police.

“How long elapsed between the shot and the moment when Monsieur Valentin came out of the house?”

“Less than half a minute. A few seconds.”

He had simply to walk through his bedroom, which was next to his kitchen. He had even forgotten to turn off the gas and had gone back a few minutes later to do so.

Yet neither Valentin nor any of the others had heard footsteps. The gunman scarcely had time to get out of sight. He would have had to pass under at least one street-lamp, yet no one had seen a thing.

It might not amount to very much, but these few established facts were the outcome of a considerable number of interrogations.

The concierge of the house opposite, Madame Keller, did her best to help the chief-inspector, but she was the kind of eager little woman who talks all of a rush and, in an effort to get things straight, mixes everything up.

“Did you leave the house?”

“I went out on the doorstep, but I didn’t cross the street. I thought he was dead and I don’t like seeing dead bodies.”

“Did any of your tenants go out?”

“Monsieur Piedboeuf, from the second floor, the man with a beard who works at the Bon Marché, came downstairs, in his dressing-gown, and went to take a look over on the other pavement. I even told him he’d be catching cold.”

“Did you see the police ambulance arrive?”

“Yes... No... I mean that just as it turned into the street I was in my room, where I’d gone to get my coat...”

Maigret had telephoned four or five times to the fifth arrondissement police station to ask questions of the policemen who had arrived on the spot.

According to them, there were about twenty people on the pavement, standing in a circle around Janvier, when they drove up. They had only taken a few random names. Monsieur Valentin had given his without being asked. They had all noticed fat Mademoiselle Clément.

“You don’t remember which windows had lights on?”

Nobody had any idea.

“You didn’t notice whether anybody moved off towards either end of the street?”

It was confusing. Some of the neighbours had approached the initial group, mingled with them, given an occasional piece of advice, while others had gone back inside their houses. There were also two or three passers-by who had stopped.

It didn't seem to be leading anywhere. It was dismal, like the rain, which still hadn't stopped falling and which was making the whole house seem damp. There was only one fire, in the living-room, and Maigret went in there from time to time to sit down, replying with grunts to Mademoiselle Clément's approaches.

Van Damme had been easily located in Brussels, since, as Paulus had said, the first thing he did was to go to the American consulate, to the enquiries office.

He began by denying his part in the raid on "The Stork", but when he was forced to face the facts he had thrown all the responsibility on to Paulus. One point was established, that he was in Brussels on the night that Janvier had been shot at in the Rue Lhomond. They had picked up the woman he had taken to the cinema that evening. And he had been seen in her company in a well-frequented restaurant in the Rue des Bouchers.

"You're wanted on the telephone, Monsieur Maigret."

It had become a game. Each time, she climbed the two flights of stairs as if she enjoyed it, giving an amused glance at the page he was scribbling on.

It was Police Headquarters again, asking his advice about a case in hand. Lucas was looking after things down there in his absence. Once or twice a day, he came to the Rue Lhomond to get documents signed.

He asked no questions, was careful not to look inquisitively at Maigret.

The chief-inspector crossed the road once more, went first of all to have a glass of white wine before going into the house opposite.

"Tell me, Madame Keller

"Yes...?"

The concierge's room was very clean, but gloomy. An enormous stove snored away, and Maigret automatically went and stood with his back to it.

“The tenant on the first floor...”

“Yes. Monsieur Boursicault... We always call him Monsieur Désiré... That’s his first name...”

“You told me he worked for the United Steamship Company...”

“For more than twenty years. He’s a purser on one of their boats.”

“You know which one?”

“He changes about. For the last year it’s been the *Asie*.”

“When I saw him going off with his case, that morning, I suppose he was rejoining his ship?”

“At this very moment he’s on his way to Pointe Noire, in Equatorial Africa. He’s hardly ever in France. It takes almost a month to get there and a month to get back.”

“So I suppose he comes home just about every two months.”

“Yes.”

“For long?”

“That depends. It’s rather complicated. He has often explained to me their rota system, but I’ve never understood it.”

“But I suppose that, when he’s in Paris, he’s here for several weeks?”

“No. That’s just it. Every other visit, that’s all. Then he has almost a whole month free. The other trips he only has time to give his wife a kiss, collect his things and set off again.”

“Was his last stay for a month?”

“No. He was here only two nights.”

Maigret’s spirits were sinking. A dozen times, while questioning somebody, he had thought that he was on to something at last, then a very simple answer would put a damper on all his hopes.

“Two nights you say? Wait a moment. He must have arrived home the night the inspector was wounded?”

“That’s right, yes. I forgot to mention that.”

“Just before the shot was fired?”

“No. He wasn’t in the house when the gun went off.”

“A little afterwards?”

“A long time afterwards. His train arrived at the Gare Montparnasse about midnight. When I opened the door for him, it was almost one o’clock in the morning.”

“I suppose he came home in a taxi?”

“He couldn’t have carried his box.”

“Was his wife expecting him?”

“Of course. She always knows his movements. Boats are like trains. There’s a time-table. She sends him airmail letters to all the ports of call. I know that better than anybody, since I’m the one who takes them for the post.”

“So she was expecting him?”

“Anxiously.”

“Are they a happy couple?”

“The happiest couple I have ever seen, even though they’re not often together, owing to Monsieur Desire’s job.”

“What sort of a man is he?”

“A good man, very kind. He’s very patient. He’ll be retiring in a year’s time, and they are going to live in the country.”

“Is his wife ill?”

“She’s hardly left her bed for five years now. She’s not supposed ever to get up, but, when I’m not there, she sometimes struggles around the flat.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

“I don’t know properly. Something to do with her legs. She’s half paralysed. Sometimes you’d think she was completely, and she can’t move at all.”

“Do you know if she has any relations in Paris?”

“Not a soul.”

“Nobody comes to see her?”

“Only me. I clean the flat for her, as I’ve told you. I go up several times during the day to take her meals and make sure there’s nothing she wants.”

“Why doesn’t her husband find a house in the country, or at Bordeaux since his ships all sail from Bordeaux?”

“He suggested that to her. I think she’s got used to me. There was also some talk of putting her into a nursing-home, but she refused.”

“You say she has no relations?”

“Desire’s mother, who’s very old and frail herself, comes to see her once a month and brings her a box of chocolates every time. The poor woman doesn’t dare tell her that she doesn’t like chocolates, and she gives them to me for my daughter.”

“You don’t think there’s anything you haven’t told me?”

“What else could there be? They are good people, in very difficult circumstances. It’s no picnic for a man to have a sick wife, and it’s no fun for a woman either...”

“Tell me, Madame Keller, the evening of the shot, you didn’t go upstairs to their flat?”

“It’s true, I did. It escaped me for the minute.”

“At what time?”

“Oh, a long time afterwards. They had already taken the young man away in the ambulance. I crossed the road, to see the spot where he had fallen and to hear what everybody was saying. There was blood on the pavement. I noticed the light on in Madame Boursicault’s flat, and I thought all of a sudden that the poor thing must be in a fit.”

“How long was that after the inspector had been attacked?”

“At least half an hour. I don’t quite remember exactly. I went up. She wasn’t asleep. I think she was waiting for me.

She knew I'd come and tell her if everything was all right."

"What did she say to you?"

"Nothing. It was I who told her what had been going on."

"She hadn't got up?"

"I think she'd gone and had a look at the window. The doctor has forbidden her to walk, but as I have already told you, she doesn't always obey."

"Was she nervous?"

"No. She had dark rings under her eyes, as usual, since she hardly ever sleeps, in spite of the drugs. I try to make her read, I take her books, but they don't interest her. She spends hour after hour alone, just thinking."

A quarter of an hour later, Maigret, the telephone receiver in his hand, his eyes glued to the little notice above the money-box, was in touch with the United Steamship Company.

Everything the concierge had told him about Boursicault was substantiated. He was an excellent man, highly esteemed by the company. The *Asie* had docked at Bordeaux just in time for him to catch the train which reached the Gare Montparnasse a few minutes after midnight.

He could not possibly have shot Janvier.

Maigret had hardly replaced the receiver before a voice above his head called:

"Would you mind coming up for a moment, Chief-Inspector?"

It was Mademoiselle Blanche, who was in the habit of leaving her door open and must have overheard the conversation.

There was quite an amusing development concerning Mademoiselle Blanche. Since Maigret had been living in the house, her celebrated uncle had not dared to come and see her, so that he was probably the most anxious of all concerned that the case should be solved.

“I don’t know whether it’s important, but I did just hear what you were saying on the phone and it gave me an idea.”

The room was full of cigarette smoke. There was a plate of cakes near the bed, in which could be seen the hollow left by the young girl’s body. She was in her dressing-gown, as usual, and it was obvious that she wore nothing underneath.

Her lack of modesty was quiet, unconscious.

“Sit down. I’m sorry to have made you climb the stairs. It’s about those people opposite.”

Sitting cross-legged on the edge of the bed, she held out the plate of cakes.

“No thank you.”

“Please remember that I don’t know them at all; I’ve never even spoken to them. But I’m almost always here in the house. From my bed I can see out of the window. I’m not madly inquisitive.”

This was true. She only seemed interested in herself—and in the characters in the novels she devoured.

“Still there was one thing I did notice, I don’t know why. Some days, their blind is up the whole day and I can see the woman in her bed through the lace curtains.”

“And on other days?”

“On other days, the blind is kept down from morning till night and even the window isn’t opened to air the room.”

“Does that happen often?”

“Often enough for it to have made an impression on me. The first time, I wondered whether the woman was dead. As I was accustomed to seeing her in bed... I spoke about it to Mademoiselle Clément...”

“This was a long time ago?...”

“Oh, yes...”

“Months?”

“More than that. Almost two years. It was a few weeks after I moved in here. I was all the more surprised because it was summer, and the few days before, the windows had been wide open all day.”

“You don’t know whether this happens at regular intervals?”

“I haven’t noticed. But it sometimes lasts three days.”

“You’ve never seen anybody else in the room?”

“Only the concierge, every day, several times a day, occasionally an old lady, and the husband, at rare intervals.”

“Does the doctor call frequently?”

“That depends on what you mean by frequently. Possibly once a month. I’m not always looking out of the window. If I hadn’t heard you on the telephone, it wouldn’t have entered my head. Do you think it will help you at all? Remember that I mean them no harm at all. I’ve never said a word to them.”

“Would you mind thinking again? When you went to your window, after the shot was fired...”

“I know what you are thinking. I’m almost certain now that there were no lights on opposite.”

“The blind was down?”

“I don’t think so. When it’s down, it makes a pale square because it’s a light-coloured blind. Now I feel, on the other hand, it was a black square, like a window open into an unlighted room.”

Was Mademoiselle Clément going to pay him back by sulking too? When Maigret came downstairs, she did not show herself as she usually did. Perhaps she was jealous of Mademoiselle Blanche?

“It’s me again,” Maigret announced as he went into Madame Keller’s lodge.

“I was just about to take up Madame Boursicault’s dinner.”

She was busy getting it ready on a tray.

“Does your tenant ever spend the whole day with the blind down?”

“The whole day! You mean three or four days! I’m always going on at her about it...”

“What reason does she give for living in the half-dark like that?”

“Well, Chief-Inspector, it’s no good trying to understand invalids. Sometimes, I almost get angry with her. Then I try and put myself in her place and I say to myself that I would probably be worse than she is. I think she sometimes gets a little neurotic. I’ve spoken to the doctor about it.”

“What did he reply?”

“Not to worry myself over it. It comes and goes with her. At times like that you’d think she hated me. If she could lock herself in, she’d probably do it. She not only has me pull the blind down, or pulls it down herself, but she forbids me to tidy up. She says she has a migraine, that the slightest noise, the slightest movement in the room will drive her mad.”

“Does this happen often?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“But she still eats.”

“As usual. I just manage to get the bed made and the bedroom dusted.”

“How many rooms are there in the flat?”

“Four, plus a box-room and the toilet. There are two bedrooms, one of which is never used, a dining-room, and a drawing-room which is never used either. They don’t have to pay much, because Monsieur Boursicault has lived in the house for more than twenty years. He was here before me even.”

“She as well?”

“They got married fifteen years ago; neither of them was young then.”

“How old is she?”

“Forty-eight.”

“And her husband?”

“He’ll be sixty next year. He admitted that, when he let me know he would be retiring and that the flat would be empty.”

“You told me that it was you who took Madame Boursicault’s mail to the post office?”

“Not the post office. The postman collects it from the lodge when he comes on his rounds.”

“Who does she write to?”

“To her husband. Sometimes to her mother-in-law.”

“Is that all?”

“I’ve never seen any other letters.”

“Does she receive many?”

“From her husband, yes. The old lady never writes.”

“Nothing else?”

“Very rarely. Sometimes I’ve taken her up an envelope which has a typewritten address.”

“How often?”

“Four or five times. The rest are just gas or electricity bills, or prospectuses.”

“Do they have a telephone?”

“He had one put in, five years ago, when she fell ill, so that she could get in touch with the doctor more easily if she needed to.”

“Would you mind not telling her that I’ve been asking you questions about her?”

“I already have mentioned it. Was that wrong? I’m always looking for something which will interest her. I told her about the questions you were asking everybody in the street. I joked about it, saying that if her husband had arrived home a few hours earlier, he would have been a suspect. I’m very sorry.”

“What was her reaction?”

“She showed no reaction. She seemed very tired. I shouldn’t be surprised if she started another migraine tomorrow or the day after.”

“You’d better take up her dinner. Tell her that I should like to have a word with her. Say that I’ve been interrogating all the tenants and that I should like to ask her one or two questions.”

“Straight away?”

“I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

He suddenly felt a need to breathe in some fresh air and, above all, to drink a glass of the Auvergnat’s white wine.

Behind the living-room curtains, opposite, Mademoiselle Clément followed him with her eyes, and he almost stuck his tongue out at her.

Chapter VI

« ^ »

What he really needed was courage. Already, during the preceding days, while he was disturbing peaceful households over their supper by asking them questions, staring at them with his great eyes, he had been more ill at ease than he would have liked to seem.

Still, he knew Madame Boursicault by sight; he had seen her through the window, only one naked arm that first day, when her husband had left, then, the next day, her face and the shape of her thin body beneath the sheet.

She was a creature of indeterminate age; her face was emaciated, without colour or life, rather like those of certain saints in religious paintings, and he thought with embarrassment of the two or three occasions when their eyes had met as they stared across the street. Did she know who he was? Or did she merely take him to be one of Mademoiselle Clément’s new lodgers? Had the concierge talked about him as she cleaned the flat?

He had the feeling, all the same, that he had made some personal contact. She had tiny, dark pupils, and her entire vitality seemed to be concentrated in them.

“There you are, a big strong man, in good health, able to move freely about the streets, yet you stick there, leaning out of a window, gazing at a poor sick woman as if it were a fascinating sight!...”

Perhaps that was not what she was thinking at all. Probably it only existed in Maigret’s imagination.

Nonetheless it was unpleasant, and he shrank from the moment of going up to see her, allowing her time to finish the meal the concierge had brought her. Madame Keller would have tactfully told her of his visit as a matter of little importance, a mere routine visit.

More than likely she would have tidied up the room, changed the sheets and the pillow-cases.

“I’ll have another,” he ordered.

He had three drinks in all, and only left the bistro when he began to feel a kind of warmth in his throat and head. On the other pavement, he saw Mademoiselle Isabelle returning, and she gave him a happy smile. There was a woman in good health, full of vitality and...

What was it that led his thoughts so far away? He filled his pipe. Then he stuffed it in his pocket, remembering that he was going to call on an invalid, and scowled as he realized that he might perhaps have to do without a smoke for some little while.

He climbed the stairs, knocked at the door, beneath which there was a gleam of electric light, although it was still day outside.

“Come in!”

It was the concierge. She opened the door to him. The tray was laid down on the red velvet seat of a chair. Only half the broth had been drunk and some sort of puree had been no more than picked at with a fork.

“I do regret having to disturb you, Madame Boursicault...”

He had not been mistaken. There were clean sheets on the bed and the invalid's nightdress had been changed. Madame Keller had even done her hair. Her dark curls, with streaks of grey, had plainly been just combed.

She was sitting up in bed and she beckoned him, with a bony hand, to an armchair by the bedside.

“I must go down now, Madame Françoise. I'll come and say goodnight when the inspector's finished with you. Whatever you do, as I've told you before, you're not to worry.”

She spoke to her in that light-hearted tone people put on when addressing the dying, and Maigret found himself copying it too.

He improved on it: “Now there's nothing whatever for you to worry about. You realize a crime has been committed in this street, just opposite you. I've interrogated all the neighbours, some of them several times over, because it's important to reconstruct the facts as exactly as possible.”

She had not yet opened her mouth. She was looking at him seriously, in the way that some children who are called too old for their age look at grown-ups.

“Madame Keller has assured me that it would not upset you if I called...”

Then she spoke for the first time.

“You may smoke your pipe.”

She must have seen him at his window, smoking a pipe all day long.

“My husband's a smoker too. It doesn't bother me.”

And, since he still hesitated:

“Please do...”

Perhaps on account of this, he felt obliged to give her some lengthy explanations.

“In an investigation of this type, the hardest thing is to establish for certain everybody’s movements. Not because people tell lies, but because their recollections are almost always imprecise. It occurred to me that someone who can only watch the outside world from their bedside would be likely to register certain details more precisely than other people. I presume, Madame Boursicault, you were in bed at the time the shot was fired?”

“Yes, Chief-Inspector. I’m so seldom up! If I did what I was told, I would never get up. I practically only do so on the sly.”

She spoke slowly, in a level voice which gave a dreary tone to her words.

“You were expecting your husband that night, weren’t you?”

“I knew he’d be coming in about one in the morning.”

“Yet you had gone to sleep?”

“I wasn’t asleep. I had merely put out the light. The light makes me tired after a bit.”

“Your window was closed?”

“I think it was half open. Probably just a few inches.”

“The blind was down?”

“Most likely. I don’t remember.”

“You heard the shot fired?”

“How could I help it?”

“Did you know straight away that it was a shot?”

“There was no sound of a car in the street. So it couldn’t have been a burst tyre.”

“You heard no footsteps just beforehand?”

“No.”

“Nor the noise of a door or window being opened or closed?”

“Not before, but afterwards. A good many of them. The neighbours looked out of their windows. Someone came out of the house opposite.”

“Just a moment. Immediately after the explosion, were there no hurried footsteps?”

“Yes, I think there were.”

“You can’t say for certain?”

“No.”

“You didn’t get up?”

“Not at once.”

“But you did get out of bed?”

“When I heard a babble of voices on the pavement opposite.”

“Did you switch on the light?”

She appeared to be considering.

“No. I definitely did not. I was in my nightclothes and there were lighted windows opposite. I wouldn’t have liked to be seen.”

“What did you see?”

“A lot of people were gathered round the body. Others were coming to join them.”

“Did you stay long at the window?”

“Until a police ambulance drew up.”

“That means you didn’t see or hear anything which could help me in my enquiries?”

“I’m afraid so, Chief-Inspector. Madame Keller came upstairs a little later on to tell me what had happened. I didn’t let on to her that I’d been at the window, or she would have scolded me.”

It was warm in the musty-smelling room. Maigret felt uncomfortable sitting in the too low armchair and, from a sort of modesty, only smoked in very tiny puffs.

“May I ask you your age, madame?”

“I’m forty-eight. It’s exactly fifteen years since I got married. So you see that I was already what they call an old maid.”

She looked across at an enlarged photograph, opposite her bed, above the fireplace; it showed herself in her wedding dress on the arm of a man, taller than her, older, who looked serious, a little bit solemn.

“That’s your husband?”

“Yes. He was a widower. His first wife died of pneumonia after they had been married seven years.”

She added in a rather lower voice:

“She died in this room, in this bed. They had no children.”

From then on, without Maigret having to ask any questions, she launched into a long monologue; she seemed to be doing it for her own sake, with the monotonous delivery of a running tap.

She no longer looked at him, but stared vacantly ahead, and there were pauses while she regained her breath.

“You see, Boursicault is the best person in the world. Everybody will tell you that, particularly in the United, where they adore him. He joined them when he was sixteen, as a messenger boy, and he made good all by himself, studying and neglecting everything else. His parents were very poor and lived at Bordeaux. His father was a drunkard, and each Saturday his mother had to look for him in every police station in town.

“That’s why he’s always had such a horror of drink. I’m sorry I’ve nothing here to offer you. There is never a drop of alcohol, not even wine, in the house.

“At first, I think he was frightened of the hereditary factor, and he kept the strictest rules...”

Maigret opened his mouth, but she didn’t give him time to speak, so he resigned himself to listening to the rest of it.

“Some people laughed at him, particularly on board ship, where everybody drinks so much. He doesn’t gamble, doesn’t run after women. At sea, he spends his evenings in his cabin, reading or working. He has learnt, all on his own, five or six languages, and he speaks several native dialects.”

The furniture was old-fashioned, as was every object adorning the room. The electric light seemed drab, because of the daylight outside, and made the whole place look dull, covered with dust.

He had come in order to ask precise questions, and now he had to submit to these interminable confidences.

“I met him while he was on leave in Paris, between ships, since, even when he was a widower, he used to come back to Paris, where he had kept on his flat.”

“Doesn’t his mother live in Paris?”

She was not surprised that he knew all this.

“Yes. He brought her here a long time ago, when his first wife was alive. It’s he who has always had to support her, because he’s an only child. He settled her in a room in the Rue des Tournelles. He adores his mother. She’s very old now. She still comes to see me occasionally, and that’s practically the only time she does go out.”

“Why didn’t she come and live with you?”

“She was the one who was against it. She says that that always turns out badly in the end, that a married couple should be independent.”

“Do you get on well with her?”

“I love her as if she were my own mother. When I met Boursicault, I was an assistant in a men’s shop in the Boulevard Saint-Michel. He came in to buy some socks and black ties. He didn’t flirt with me, but I could see that he kept looking at me closely, as if something about me had intrigued him. I learnt later what had so affected him. He didn’t try to hide it from me. It seems that I resemble his first wife, feature for feature. Go over to the fireplace. There’s a little photo of her on the left, in the mahogany frame.”

Maigret got up, sighing, and looked conscientiously at a bad photograph of a rather common-place young woman, who smiled sadly, as if she sensed in advance that she would die young.

He was sorry he had come. All this dismal greyness was submerging him, made him want to be outside to breathe the quickening air, and when he sat down again in his armchair, he felt his eyelids growing heavy.

“I didn’t see him again for almost three months. I had no idea what sort of a job he had. He was on one of his voyages to Equatorial Africa. When he returned, he invited me to go out with him. I didn’t even hesitate.”

She was thirty-three then and he was forty-six, they were obviously old enough to do without a chaperon.

“That was the evening, after we had dined at the Rôtisserie Périgourdine, that he spoke about his first wife and asked me if I would agree to marry him. I was alone, without any family, very poor. I answered yes. It was only later that I came to realize what sort of a man he was, and how lucky I had been to meet him. Just think what might have happened had I fallen ill before meeting him. I would be in a hospital now, living off public charity.

“It’s no fun for him, when he comes back, to find a wife in my condition, and yet he has never uttered a word of complaint. On the contrary, he’s always comforting me, trying to appear as cheerful as possible...”

Why did it pass through Maigret’s head that there must be something lugubrious about this man’s gaiety? He pitied them both, of course. But, for some reason or other, their misfortune did not succeed in touching him.

Her words seemed to reach him through a veil. The atmosphere in this room where he sat suggested the dreary boredom of some family album which strangers insist on showing you without leaving out a single aunt or tiny cousin.

He was, in actual fact, almost asleep, and had to make a continual effort to keep his eyes open. He had been going

round in circles for much too long in this little street; he was suddenly sick of it all and felt a strong desire to see the lights and brush elbows with the crowds in the Grands Boulevards.

“I fell ill about five years ago, and he found me the best specialists. To start with, he took six months’ leave to look after me, although that naturally meant his retiring six months later. I don’t know why I’m telling you all this.” (Nor did he!) “Perhaps it’s because I noticed you a number of times at your window and saw that you were looking at me with interest?... Apart from Madame Keller and my mother-in-law’s, visits, I am always alone... So I think...”

He had nearly dozed off. He must have closed his eyes, because she was looking at him with a saddened expression.

“I’m boring you, aren’t I?”

“Not at all, madame. I was merely closing my eyes because I, too, was thinking.”

“What were you thinking about?”

“About you... Your life... Were you born in Paris?”

Perhaps he would at last be able to ask her some questions.

“I was born in Le Havre.”

“Would it be prying to ask you your maiden name?”

“Binet... Françoise Binet...”

And that was enough to set her off again.

“My father was a seaman. That’s a curious coincidence, isn’t it? He only rose to be leading seaman. There were nine of us children. Now there can hardly be more than three or four left.”

“You don’t keep in touch with your family any longer?”

“Not for ages. As the girls grew old enough, we were sent out to work as maids, and the boys found their own level for themselves. My mother and father are dead.”

“Were you a housemaid?”

“I was a children’s nanny, at first, when I was fourteen, with a family who spent their summers at Étretat. I came with this family to Paris, where they lived in the Avenue Hoche. They were very rich people. I wanted to become a lady’s maid. I went to a dressmaking school, in the Avenue de Wagram.”

“And then? What did you do?”

It seemed to him, all of a sudden, that there was a hesitation in her voice.

“I had a boy-friend and my employers threw me out.”

“How old were you?”

“Sixteen.”

“Why did they throw you out?”

“Because I didn’t come home one night.”

“You stayed out all night?”

“Yes. I have not always been so well-behaved, Chief-Inspector. I was young. I wanted to enjoy myself.”

“And you did enjoy yourself?”

“One thinks so, at that age.”

“So you stopped working—?”

“Yes, for a time. Then I became a waitress in a restaurant which catered mainly for regular customers.”

“Your husband knows all this?”

“I told him that I was not worthy of him.”

“Did you give him any details?”

“He refused to listen to them.”

“Did you sink really low?” he asked watching her carefully.

“Not the lowest, no.”

“You had lovers?”

“Yes.”

She added with a little laugh:

“It’s difficult to believe, seeing me as I am now, isn’t it?”

“Did they give you money?”

“Sometimes. But if that’s what you’re getting at, it was never my profession.”

“Were you still having adventures when you met Boursicault?”

“I’d finished with that a long time before.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Because I no longer wanted to. It didn’t last very long, taken all in all. I don’t think I was the type. I must have been made to be a respectable housewife.”

“Where were you living when you worked in the men’s clothes shop?”

“I had a room in the Rue Monsieur-le-Prince, just around the corner.”

“Furnished?”

“No. I had bought a few pieces of furniture. I thought I would end up an old maid. I was already becoming a little queer.”

Why did he suddenly stand up and begin to pace the room, as he would have done had he been in his own office? He appeared to have forgotten the invalid in her bed, narrowed his eyebrows, looking puzzled.

He mechanically hunted for an ashtray so he could empty his pipe, could not find one, and she guessed.

“There’s one on the dining-room table. You only have to open that door...”

He did so, turning on the light-switch, and found as she said, on the Henri II table, a copper ashtray with a large curved pipe on it. It was almost as if he had met Boursicault; he imagined him in his slippers and his shirt-sleeves, smoking this pipe in the flat.

The bleak voice was going on, behind him, as if a rosary was being mumbled:

“On board ship, my husband smokes cigarettes, except in his cabin, but here he prefers his pipe and...”

He went back hurriedly and looked into her eyes.

“Up to now you have seemed very frank, Madame Boursicault.”

She appeared surprised by this attack, waited, and he noticed that one of her hands was clenching on the sheet.

“I was convinced that you had been telling the truth.”

She murmured:

“I have been telling you the truth.”

“Then I hope you will go on doing so.”

He hesitated a little longer before going into the attack, since he was not quite sure that he had not made a mistake, and, in that case, he would seem an unfeeling brute.

“How did he get into the house?”

He stood a yard away from the bed and must have looked enormous to the invalid, at whom he stared down from his full height, his empty pipe in his mouth. They were suddenly enveloped in a different quality of silence, as if both of them were holding their breath.

He was sure she had grown paler, if it were possible to become paler than she usually was. Her nostrils were pinched, like the nostrils of a corpse. She was very thin under the sheet. He felt like turning his head away, perhaps even taking his hat and leaving.

“Of whom are you speaking?”

“I don’t know who he is. I’m speaking of the man who comes to see you when your husband is away at sea, and whom your concierge seems never to have met.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Listen to me, Madame Boursicault. I wish you no harm. I am a policeman and I’m doing my duty. One of my inspectors was shot opposite your windows.”

“You think it was I who shot him?”

“I haven’t said that and I’m pretty convinced that you didn’t. But, you see, I’m equally convinced that your reason for talking about your husband and one period of your life was to hide other episodes. Presently I shall order my men to trace your life backwards from the time you were married. The police at Le Havre will be on the job there too. It will doubtless mean a long time. There will probably be some gaps. But, with patience, we will be able to reconstruct almost your entire existence and find anybody who’s had any contact with you.”

This time he really did turn away his head, because she had closed her eyes and he saw a tear spurt from her eyelid. She didn’t move. For nearly a minute he remained silent.

He continued, filling his pipe to give himself something to do:

“I’m sorry if I do not believe in your migraines. Presently I shall also telephone the doctor who looks after you, and I know already what he will say.”

She gave a light sigh, still kept her eyes shut.

“At this point, one of my English colleagues would be obliged to warn you, by reminding you that anything you say may be used in evidence against you. French Law does not require me to tell you this, but I don’t want to trick you into anything. It’s up to you to decide whether you want to confide in me or not.”

Slowly, she shook her head. He had expected something worse, a fainting fit or the pretence of one, a nervous attack, a burst of indignation. Yet it was almost as embarrassing to see her lying there motionless, prostrate.

“I am convinced, I shan’t conceal it from you, that you receive visits unknown to anybody else, and that when your blinds are down, sometimes for three days, it’s because you

have someone with you. This person, presumably, knows the habits of the household. Every morning, the concierge is away for more than half an hour, doing her shopping. It would be easy, then, to slip into your flat. You have nothing to say?"

She took quite a while before she opened her mouth and her lips were as pale as her cheeks.

"I've nothing to say."

"You claim that it isn't true?"

The eyelids parted at last, and a cold look rested on the chief-inspector.

"You're entitled, I suppose, to imagine whatever you like."

Suddenly he felt in her voice an energy which he would have found it impossible to suspect a few minutes earlier.

"Was there a man in your room when the shot was fired?"

She was staring at him without replying.

"A woman?" he insisted.

The lips did not move.

"You really are ill, and I do not wish to tire you. You know that I am opposite, at Mademoiselle Clément's. The telephone is at the head of your bed. If, at any time, you feel like getting in touch with me, give me a ring."

He hesitated, embarrassed.

"Please understand, Madame Boursicault, that, in spite of all appearances, I am not your enemy. It's my duty to find out the truth and I will find it out. I sincerely hope, and this is what I want you to realize, that it will entail as little trouble as possible."

She still said nothing. She was looking at him steadily, as if thinking hard. He waited a little, hoping all the time that she would speak.

He had picked up his hat. He still did not make a move towards the door. One last time, he opened his mouth to speak, but he closed it again without saying anything.

He would get nothing more from her, he was sure of that. Perhaps she would telephone him later?

He was not depending on it too much. He nodded to her gravely.

“You must excuse me now. I shall send Madame Keller to you.”

Her lips still tightly closed, she watched him leave, and he shut the door behind him, sighed deeply when he was on the landing.

The concierge was waiting for him in the passage and seemed surprised to see him so serious. He himself did not realize the way he was looking.

“She’s unwell?”

“You had better go up to her. If anything happens, no matter what, let me know at Mademoiselle Clément’s.”

He had not dined yet. He went to the Auvergnat’s, intending to eat, but he stopped at the bar and drank two glasses of wine, one after the other. There was a mirror behind the bottles and he was disconcerted to see his face looking so lined.

A few minutes later, without even waiting to eat, he was in contact with Torrence.

“Is Lucas not there?”

“He’s just left for the Place d’Italie, where those Arabs have been playing with knives.”

“Will you please, as quickly as possible, ask the listening-post to tap the number of Madame Boursicault, in the Rue Lhomond? And send me over an inspector.”

“Vacher is here.”

“Good. He already knows the house. I’ll probably be in the little restaurant opposite.”

As he hung up the receiver, he saw Mademoiselle Clément’s face, through the little window, and he noticed that she wore an unaccustomed expression. He did not understand at once.

She no longer seemed to be playing a game. She was watching him, if not with fear, at least with a trace of anxiety.

It was because he himself had suddenly changed. She did not know him in this guise. The moment had come, and he had finished with floundering and smelling around in corners.

He found her standing at the door of her living-room.

“Are you going out?”

“I’m going to eat.”

“What shall I do if someone rings you up?”

“You can come and let me know over at the Auvergnat’s.”

She did not dare ask him if something new had turned up. Perhaps she had overheard his conversation with Torrence? She knew, at any rate, that it was no time to play the innocent little girl.

“Is that you, Torrence?”

This time, he was telephoning from the bar.

“She hasn’t tried to get a number yet, Chief.”

“In that case she probably won’t try at all. They must keep a tag on her all the same. Have you many men available?”

“There are four or five free tonight.”

Maigret spelled out the name of Boursicault, then that of Binet.

“Take this down. She’s forty-eight and was born at Le Havre. Her father was a sailor. She has brothers and sisters. That’s for the Le Havre flying squad. Tell them to look up all the town-hall registers and wherever else they can. They probably won’t find much.”

“And in Paris?”

“Get round the town-halls as well. She once lived in the Roule district. It would be just as well to have a quick look at the old Vice Squad files of around twenty years ago, twenty-five even.”

Fat Torrence, at the other end of the line, was scribbling feverishly:

“Is that the lot?”

“No. Go up to Records and see that they’ve got nothing under Binet. Tomorrow morning, I want someone to go along to the shirt shop in the Boulevard Saint-Michel, not far from the Rue Monsieur-le-Prince. The place may have changed hands after fifteen years, but there’s a chance they’ll still be there.”

All this might as easily take several weeks or a few hours. It depended on luck.

“Lastly, find out what you can about this same Françoise Binet at 48, Rue Monsieur-le-Prince. She lived in the house fifteen years ago.”

“You’re staying down there?”

“Yes. I’ll keep Vacher with me. Is he on night duty?”

“He came on an hour ago.”

“How’s Janvier getting on?”

“He can be taken home in two or three days. He’s impatient. So’s his wife. The doctor would actually like to keep him a little longer.”

When he came back into the bar, Inspector Vacher was already there, drinking a cup of coffee laced with brandy.

“Have you eaten?”

“Yes. Anything new?”

“Is it still raining?”

Vacher pointed to his wet raincoat hanging on the hat-stand.

“Bad luck for you, my poor lad. I’m afraid I’m going to ask you to spend the night in the open...”

He changed his mind.

“On second thoughts, if you stay at the living-room window, it will do just as well. There’s only one house to watch.”

He ate without enjoyment. He forgot to telephone the doctor as he had threatened Madame Boursicault he would. Besides, he hadn't even asked her her doctor's name. He could have found it out from the concierge.

It was not for this reason that he went over to Madame Keller's lodge to see her when he had finished his meal. At once, as if she were expecting him, she gave him a reproachful look.

"How is she?"

"What have you been saying to her? I found her stretched on her bed like a corpse and she took no notice of me whatsoever. Her eyes were shut. She was crying. Great tears running down her poor cheeks."

"She didn't say anything to you?"

"She only shook her head when I asked her if she needed anything. She didn't care if the light were on or off. I shut the window and switched it off."

Maigret almost went upstairs. But what would he say?

He was fully aware of the responsibility he had taken on himself.

"Does she have medicines in her room?"

"There are all sorts: bottles, pills, powders. The doctors have tried everything. Do you think she might...?"

The concierge looked frightened. He remained cool.

"I don't imagine that she's the sort of woman to do that," he said, "but you'd better stay near her until I send you a nurse."

"She won't let me."

"Tell her that it was on my orders."

"She'll be angry with me..."

He shrugged his shoulders, crossed the road, rejoined Vacher on Mademoiselle Clément's doorstep and sent him off to find a nurse whose services Headquarters often called upon.

At ten o'clock in the evening, the Rue Lhomond was calm, with only the gentle sound of the rain. There was a light on opposite. The blind was not down. From his window, Maigret could see the nurse reading a novel, in the armchair he had sat in a while ago. Madame Boursicault seemed to be sleeping.

Mademoiselle Clément had just retired to her bedroom. Mademoiselle Isabelle had not gone out. The Lotards' baby was not crying. Fachin was studying, and the Safts, in their room, were chatting quietly.

On the ground floor, Vacher had opened the living-room curtains so that he could see what was happening outside and he sat there in the dark, a pot of coffee within reach, smoking cigarette after cigarette.

Maigret was waiting for his wife's telephone call before going to bed ; he went down in his slippers.

"... But, of course. I'm feeling very well," he assured her.

"I hope you're not going to stay in that house for ever? Listen. Hortense is much better and I might possibly get home in two days, if not tomorrow evening... Are you sure you'll be pleased to see me?..."

He repeated, his mind not on his words:

"But of course! Of course!"

Then, before going upstairs, he went in to have a few words with Vacher, in the darkness of the living-room. He could hear Mademoiselle Clément moving about in her bedroom; soon afterwards the mattress creaked under her weight.

It was a long time before he went to sleep. He was still aware of that lighted window, on the other side of the street. He also thought about that little idiot Paulus and began to get angry with him, as if he held him responsible for everything that had happened and everything that was going to happen.

At all events, it was working out! And he had got quite a long way!

Chapter VII

« ^ »

The first time he woke, a little before one o'clock, there were still two lights on in the block of houses, and he was now in a position to be able to put a name to each window and tell almost without fail what the people were doing.

Following his instructions, the nurse had not pulled down the blind, and the lace curtains were open, so that he was able to glimpse the white blob of the bed, the motionless face of Françoise Boursicault.

She was lying on her back, her eyes shut. Seen from above, her nose seemed thinner and longer.

The nurse was still reading her book, a cup of coffee at hand on the little table which she had drawn up near her armchair.

Maigret, that night, was burdened with what almost amounted to a guilty conscience. He had just had some confused dreams which he could barely remember, but they left a disagreeable impression.

He went downstairs, without putting on any lights, entered the living-room where nothing could be seen but the reddish tip of Vacher's cigarette.

"Is that you, Chief?"

"Everything all right?"

"Yes, thanks. The fat lady's left me everything I need. She got up a while ago to make me some coffee. She was in her nightdress. If I hadn't been on duty, I'd willingly have made a move in that direction."

"You haven't noticed anything outside?"

"Only a drunk who zigzagged past, half an hour ago. I followed your instructions and went out, and a bit farther on asked him for his papers. It was a tramp I know by sight; he was going to sleep in the Place Maubert."

The telephone people at the listening-post had nothing to tell. It was true that Madame Boursicault could only have telephoned before the arrival of the nurse, that's to say during an hour at most.

"Keep watching then!" Maigret sighed.

He stopped. He knew where Mademoiselle Clément kept the beer, behind the door of the cellar. He went to find a bottle quietly, carried it with him to his room, leaving Vacher at the window.

In the Ternes district, several bistros were still open and men from Headquarters were asking questions about a certain Françoise Binet.

Was it possible to hope, after all this time, for any results? Happily there are more Parisians than one might think, for whom the greater part of the city is just foreign territory and who keep to their neighbourhood as if it were a village. Some people's universe consists of only a few streets, and for twenty years or more they frequent the same restaurants or the same little bar.

Maigret was convinced that Françoise Boursicault was not asleep, that she would not be sleeping at all that night, and that her brain was working actively.

Did she suspect that her telephone would be tapped by the listening-post? Probably. She must be thinking everything out, with the patience, the attention to tiny detail, of a person who for many years has known only the solitude of her bed.

Nevertheless, he would have bet that she would be up to something: *she would be forced to do something*.

He fell asleep once more, heavily, dreamt again, woke up for the second time a little before sunrise and saw the nurse leaning out of the window, smoking a cigarette. He did not go downstairs, but went back to bed, and when he opened his eyes, the sky was grey, the cornices were dripping, but the rain had stopped.

The night had passed uneventfully. Vacher had watched in vain, and the chief-inspector went to set him free.

“You’d better go home and get some sleep. You may have to come back on the job tonight. Call in at the Quai and tell Torrence to send me somebody over. If there’s anything new, he’s to come and put me in the picture.”

Only once in his life, when he was twelve years old, had he tried to cut a chicken’s neck, because his father was away and his mother had asked him. He could still remember it. He was pale, his nostrils pinched. The feathers trembled in his hand. The bird beat with one wing. He could not succeed in keeping its head on the block they used for chopping wood, and his other hand awkwardly brandished the axe.

His first blow had been so clumsy that he had only managed to wound the fowl and, to deal with the rest of the blows, he had kept his eyes shut.

He had eaten none of it. He had never killed another chicken in his life.

Madame Boursicault also had a long thin neck. And she might be lying motionless in her bed, but he still imagined he felt her fluttering in his grasp.

Yet he had made a mistake when he thought she might put an end to herself. If she had been going to do that, she would probably have done it immediately after his departure, before the arrival of the nurse.

He telephoned the latter.

“She spent a quiet night,” she told him. “She didn’t sleep a lot, two or three hours perhaps, in small doses, but she’s not distressed.”

“Did she say anything?”

“She hasn’t said a word to me, not even to ask for a glass of water.”

“I think you can leave her now.”

He saw her going a little later, a raincoat over her white uniform, an umbrella in her hand. Then Madame Keller dragged the dustbins out to the edge of the pavement, looked

over at the chief-inspector's windows, noticed him and only gave him a black look of reproach.

He had guessed that, once the nurse had gone, Madame Boursicault would get up to close the curtains and perhaps pull down the blind.

He had underestimated her. She left the window as it was, and he felt he could understand that she did it out of bravado or spite. So he was able to continue watching her, she was not trying to hide. The concierge carried up her breakfast. He saw the lips of the two women moving, but only the concierge occasionally glanced in his direction. Would Madame Boursicault dare send her out with a message?

It was Lucas who arrived a little later in a taxi and who came upstairs to the chief-inspector's room as the latter was shaving.

"Torrence has gone home to sleep. He's caught 'flu and had a filthy headache. He gave me some information for you."

"Did they find someone who knew her?"

"At the 'Diabolo', a seedy night-club in the Rue de l'Étoile. There's a drunken old woman who hangs around there most nights. You've probably come across her over in the Ternes district. She always wears the sort of clothes which were fashionable twenty-five years ago, dresses too short and too tight-fitting, which give her the odd look of a little girl; she often ends her nights at the station. They call her Thérèse."

"What did she have to say?"

"She'd had a lot to drink when young Lapointe dug her out and he didn't get much from her. I asked the police over there to bring her to the Quai as soon as she's sweated the liquor out of her."

"Did she know Françoise Binet?"

"She says she did."

" 'A lovely little thing,' she said, 'as plump as a pigeon, laughing all the time and showing the prettiest teeth in the

world. She hung around with Dédé. It didn't last, though, because Dédé wanted her out on the streets.' ”

“Who's Dédé?”

“They think he's a bloke who now runs a bar in Nantes.”

“She didn't mention any others?”

“Always by their Christian names and nicknames. She keeps saying:

“ ‘A lovely little thing... I'd just like to know what's become of her...’

“Listen, Lucas. In a moment the concierge will probably come out to go and do her shopping. Be ready. Watch her closely. She may take a letter to the post office, or send a telegram, or even meet someone. I don't count on it too much, but if it does happen, it's important that we get hold of the message.”

“Right, Chief.”

Maigret went downstairs and, on the off-chance, rang the flying squad at Nantes. Mademoiselle Clément, who was getting dressed, opened the curtain across the little window to see who was using the telephone.

“This is Maigret here, of Police Headquarters. Who am I speaking to?”

“Grollin. It's nice to hear your voice, Chief.”

“Would you pay a little visit to a bar run by someone called Dédé? Know him?”

“Over at the harbour, yes.”

“Ask him questions about a certain Françoise Binet whom he knew twenty years ago or more.”

“You think he'll remember her? He seems to be the type to have known quite a few chicks in his life.”

“Try anyway. See if you can find out who took the girl over after him. Get all you can out of him. Ring me back here, not at the Quai.”

He gave him Mademoiselle Clément's number.

"It's coming down in buckets!" sighed Grollin. "Never mind. I've got an umbrella. Dédé'll be in his bed. It's going to put the wind up him being woken by the police."

Mademoiselle Clément came out of the living-room, her face freshly powdered, the tiny hairs around her ears and neck still moist.

"Would you like some coffee?"

"For me and Lucas, yes, if it's no trouble."

The lodgers now greeted him as if he were one of themselves, with always a kind of query in their eyes.

"Take a good look at her window, Lucas. Note the position of the curtains. If, later on, it doesn't matter what time of day, you notice any change, don't fail to let me know."

"Are you expecting her to try and signal to somebody?"

"I would be prepared to swear there's a signal."

"But the telephone? Hasn't she got one within reach?"

"That's not enough."

"Are you sure someone comes to see her when her husband is away?"

"I'm convinced of it. There's no other possible explanation. Actually it's likely that he'll ring her before coming into the street."

"So there'd be no need for a signal."

"Suppose that the concierge came in at the last moment, or the doctor had arrived. He doesn't come on fixed days. He calls to see her from time to time as it fits in with his visits."

"I see."

"They would have had to arrange some means of warning him when there was danger. It could be the position of the curtains, or the blind, or anything. I've looked at that window such a lot during the last few days that I wonder if I would see any difference. When were you last here?"

“The day before yesterday.”

Lucas, his face raised towards the window opposite, wrinkled his brows.

“Are you struck by something?”

“I’m not sure. I’d like to go and have a look from upstairs.”

They went up to Maigret’s room, the one that had been Emile Paulus’s. Lucas walked straight across to the window.

“When I was last here, two days ago, I remember that the window over there was open.”

“That’s right. It was not raining then. It was much warmer than today. Go on.”

“Perhaps I’m wrong, but I don’t think that copper pot was there.”

In the middle of the window-sill, it was true, they could now see a copper pot holding a green plant.

Maigret was certain that, the evening before, this pot was not in the same place. He had seen it in a corner of the room, on a narrow little table; he had even stared at it for quite some time as he talked to Madame Boursicault.

“Stay here. Watch the street.”

He crossed the road, went into Madame Keller’s lodge and was received with deliberate coldness. She was getting ready to go and do her shopping. The postman had passed, and there were letters in the pigeon-holes, but not in Madame Boursicault’s.

“Could you tell me, Madame Keller, if, when you went up to her this morning, your tenant asked you to move the green plant from its place?”

She said “No”, dryly.

“Do you ever put it outside the window?”

“No.”

“I’m sorry to go on about it. The matter is much more important than you may think. You are the one who does the

housework. If I'm not mistaken, the plant usually stands in the left-hand corner, near the dining-room door."

"That's its place."

"You've *never* been asked to put it outside the window?"

She stared at him suddenly, and he saw that he had stirred a memory. But she did not feel like talking, because she now considered him a cruel man, who made her tenant suffer.

"She did ask you to, didn't she? When was it?"

"A long time ago."

"Why?"

"I don't know. It's not my business."

Pretending not to notice her obvious unwillingness, he persisted.

"Several months ago?"

"Six, at least."

He was on to it at last and he felt a little flutter in his chest. His only fear was to see this woman in front of him withdraw into silence. He smiled at her gently.

"Six months ago, that was in the autumn. The window was probably open then?"

"I don't remember."

"I feel sure you had already been up to do the housework, that you had come down again, that you were getting ready to go out shopping, like today..."

She followed him carefully, and he could tell that, as he went along, her memories were beginning to take shape. She was surprised that he had guessed so correctly. She said:

"I went up again, yes..."

"You went up again, when you weren't expected..."

"I had forgotten to ask her what she felt like to eat. I also wanted to know if she had to have a prescription made up

again. She then asked me to put the copper pot on the window sill.”

“Without saying why?”

“Because it would be good for the plant. The sun was shining.”

“What happened during the next few days?”

Defeated, she gave the chief-inspector an amazed glance.

“I wonder how you could have guessed. The next day, the sun was shining again and I wanted to put the plant back on the window-sill.”

“She told you not to do it?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you very much, Madame Keller.”

He almost asked her if her tenant had wanted her to deliver a message, but he preferred to let Lucas see to this.

“Will you be worrying her any more?”

He preferred not to answer and, a few minutes later, he was knocking on the door. He wasn’t asked to come in. He turned the handle, opened the door and found Françoise Boursicault’s eyes fixed on him. With a sigh of resignation, she let herself fall back on to the pillow.

“I’m sorry to have to disturb you again.”

She didn’t say a word, kept her lips tightly closed, her whole life concentrated in the pupils of her eyes.

“I wanted to make sure that the presence of the nurse did not prevent your sleeping...”

The silence continued.

“And I thought that, perhaps, you might have something to say to me this morning?”

She still did not waver. He walked up and down the room, and he stopped as if by chance in front of the green plant, and began to stroke its leaves.

Then, in the way that certain people, when they are paying a visit, cannot help straightening the pictures on the walls, he picked up the copper vase and went to replace it on the table.

“That’s its right place, isn’t it? The concierge must have made a mistake.”

He purposely refrained from looking at her. He lingered a little longer, then turned round, and as he had expected, he found her much paler, a look of panic in her eyes.

“Does my taking the pot from the window annoy you?”

He was afraid that she would start crying again and he remembered the chicken in his childhood. He hesitated a few seconds, seized hold of the back of a chair covered with crimson velvet, sat astride it, facing the bed, and began to light his pipe.

It was too bad if she wasn’t ready for it. He had just decided to attempt the operation.

“You were expecting *him* to come to see you this morning, weren’t you?”

He had probably never been given a look full of such hate, dull hate, without violence, a mixture of scorn and perhaps a kind of bitter resignation.

They were suddenly both on foreign ground, performing in an unreal atmosphere, and they understood each other before words were fully spoken; each look, each tiny movement became heavy with meaning.

“He is still in Paris, isn’t he?”

After each phrase, he gave her time to reflect, listening all the while for sounds on the staircase.

“If he wasn’t still in Paris, you would not be nervous and you wouldn’t have put that vase at the window. Because you did get up to move it. It wasn’t the concierge who did it. Nor was it the nurse.”

She stretched her bony hand towards a glass of water standing on the bedside table and swallowed a mouthful, with such an effort that her neck was stretched taut.

“The Nantes police, at this very moment, are engaged in interrogating a man you once knew well, a certain Dédé; Dédé will give us other names. And those people, in turn, will point out others.”

This was almost making him nervous.

“It’s possible that he won’t come, that he is suspicious. He must have been expecting a call from you, yesterday evening or during the night, but you were not able to telephone him.”

A pause.

“He knows, through you, that the police have set a trap in the street. During the last few days, he has probably been wandering around the neighbourhood, without coming too close. I’m wondering why he didn’t rent a room or a flat in the house. That would have been so much easier!”

Was he mistaken? Was there perhaps a vague hint of a smile on her strained lips?

He recalled the words of the drunken old woman:

“A lovely little thing, as plump as a pigeon...”

“Do you realize, Françoise, what is going to happen?”

She had frowned when she heard herself being called by her Christian name.

“He will come along the street. He has probably already come and seen the copper vase warning him of danger.

“It’s possible that he will follow the concierge and try to speak to her, because he is even more worried than you are.

“He thinks that we are going to arrest you.

“At any cost, he will want to prevent that happening.”

At last he obtained his first reaction. The invalid drew herself up and she said to him furiously:

“I won’t let it!”

“You see he does exist, I wasn’t mistaken.”

“Have you no pity?”

“Did he have any pity on my inspector, who had done him no harm whatsoever? He only thought of his own personal safety.”

“That’s not true.”

“Let’s say he only thought of you...”

She still did not suspect that in a few odd phrases she had told him more than he had dared hope for.

“Yes! Supposing that it was for your sake that he fired the shot, to prevent your husband, when he came back from Bordeaux...”

“Stop it, for God’s sake! Can’t you understand how horrible all this is?”

She was no longer cool and collected. Unable to bear it, incapable of remaining motionless in her bed any longer, she got up, in her nightdress, revealing her bare feet, her thin legs. She stood on the carpet, her eyes angry.

“Arrest me then, since you have discovered so much. It was I who fired the gun. It was I who wounded your inspector. Put me in prison and let’s be done with it...”

She attempted to walk towards a wardrobe, probably in order to find some clothes and get dressed, but she had forgotten about her illness and she fell, ridiculously, at Maigret’s feet, found herself on all fours on the floor, making futile efforts to get up.

He was more than ever reminded of the episode of the chicken.

He had to pick her up bodily, but she fought back and, intentionally or not, she dealt him blows, gripped hold of his tie.

“Calm down, Françoise. You’ll hurt yourself; you know quite well that I shall not arrest you, that you did not fire the shot, that you could never have done it.”

“I tell you it was me...”

It lasted more than a minute, and Maigret wondered if Mademoiselle Isabelle or Monsieur Kridelka were watching them through the window. He finally managed to lift her up, and she hardly weighed anything. He put her on the bed, kept hold of her wrists until he finally felt her muscles relaxing.

“Will you be sensible?”

She shook her head negatively, but, when he let her go, she stopped moving, and with the sheet he covered up her body, which had become half naked in the struggle.

He straightened up and was tidying his hair when he heard her burst out, like an enraged child:

“I shan’t tell you a thing.”

Her face buried in the pillow, she spoke through clenched teeth, to herself, and it was quite hard to hear what she said.

“I shan’t tell you a thing and you will never find out. You are a brute. I detest you. If some other terrible thing happens, it will be your fault. Oh, how I hate you...”

He could not restrain a smile, standing there, watching her, without any malice, only pity in his eyes.

As he did not move, it was she who half-turned her head in order to watch him with one eye.

“What are you waiting for? For me to speak? I shan’t tell you a thing. You may do what you like, I shan’t tell you a thing. And, anyway, what right have you to be in my room?”

She was changing her attitude once again. She was no longer a woman almost fifty years old. She was a small girl who knew she was in the wrong, but refused to own up and fought back wildly. “You a policeman, and you don’t know you aren’t allowed into people’s houses without a warrant? Have you got one? Show me it! If you haven’t got one, you had better get out straight away. Do you hear? I order you to get out...”

He almost burst out laughing, feeling relaxed now himself. The reaction was setting in.

“You’re saying foolish things, Françoise...”

“I refuse to let you call me by that name... If you don’t leave immediately, I’ll scream, I’ll rouse the neighbours, I’ll tell them how you enjoy torturing a sick woman...”

“I’ll be back,” he announced, good-naturedly, and walked towards the door.

“You needn’t trouble. You’ll still get nothing more from me. Get out! I hate you... I...”

He saw that she was about to leave her bed again and he preferred to move on to the landing and shut the door. He was smiling in spite of himself, as he heard her, through the door-panel, continue talking all on her own.

When he reached the street, he raised his head and noted that she had replaced the copper vase outside the window, probably just to spite him.

He was drinking a glass of white wine, the first of the day, at the Auvergnat’s, when the concierge returned from her shopping. He noticed Lucas following her and called to him.

“Well?”

Lucas noticed his chief’s change of humour and was surprised at his happy air.

“Did she speak?”

“No. What about you?”

“I followed the concierge as you told me to do. She went to the Rue Mouffetard, and I didn’t take my eyes off her. She stopped at several barrows. I got close enough to her to hear what she was saying. She was only interested in buying her vegetables and fruit. Then she went into a butcher’s.”

“Nobody came up to her?”

“I noticed nothing at all suspicious. She posted no letters. It’s true she knew I was on her tail.”

“And she didn’t make a phone call?”

“No. Several times, she gave me a biting look and moved her lips as if she were saying some pretty disagreeable things about me to herself.”

“She’s not the only one!” Maigret sighed.

He continued to watch the street.

“You think the man’s in the district?”

“It’s more than likely. He didn’t receive her usual telephone call yesterday evening. He’s worried. But I couldn’t prevent Françoise from putting her copper vase back on the window-sill.”

The passers-by were happily few and far between. If one of them lifted his head towards Madame Boursicault’s window, the two men couldn’t fail to notice it.

When they went back to Mademoiselle Clément’s, she in turn had gone out to do her shopping. They had seen her go past, a shopping-bag in her hand. Lucas settled himself at the living-room window. Maigret telephoned the Quai des Orfèvres.

Vauquelin answered him.

“I questioned the old woman a good half-hour ago,” he said. “I was forced to offer her drinking money. She listed a heap of names, people who hung out in the Ternes district twenty-five years ago; most of them have disappeared from circulation. It’s pretty much of a muddle. I’m taking notes. I’ll check everything.”

“Did someone go along to the Rue Monsieur-le-Prince?”

“Colin’s just got back. The same concierges are still there. They remember the young lady. She was a quiet person, who had no visitors and never went out in the evening. According to the grapevine, she met a rich man, a widower, older than herself, and only left the house when she married him.”

“She didn’t receive letters from abroad?”

“No. She had no mail whatsoever.”

Maigret put some change in the money-box and went to chat with Lucas; a few minutes later the telephone rang. It was Nantes.

“Is that you, Chief? I’ve just come in from Dédé’s bar. He was in bed, as I expected, and he was pretty much on his guard at first. When I spoke to him of Françoise Binet, it took him a bit of time to remember. He called her Lulu.”

“He doesn’t know what’s happened to her?”

“He lost touch with her. Then, two or three years later, he came across her in the company of a young man, short and very dark.”

“Another lad from the district?”

“No. That’s just it. He had never seen him before. According to Dédé, he looked like a clerk or an assistant in a big store.”

“Whereabouts did this take place?”

“Around the Place Clichy. He didn’t speak to her. Lulu pretended not to recognize him.”

“What does he say about her?”

“That she was a silly fool who didn’t know what she wanted, and that she had probably ended up with a husband and lots of children.”

“Is that all?”

“That’s all. He seemed to me to have given all the dope he could. He didn’t hide the fact that he’d tried to get her to work for him, and you know what that means. She tried; but it wasn’t a success. According to him, she happened to get a customer who put her off the profession for good.”

“Thanks a lot.”

The copper vase was still outside the window. Maigret went up to his room and saw Françoise Boursicault telephoning from her bed. She was looking in his direction. Their looks met. She made no attempt to hang up.

She was speaking calmly, with a serious, thoughtful expression on her face. From time to time she nodded her head affirmatively.

When she replaced the receiver, she lay down in bed and closed her eyes.

Maigret knew they would call him, so he went downstairs, paced up and down the passage waiting for the telephone to ring. "Hallo. Is that you, Chief-Inspector?"

"Yes. Who has she been ringing up?"

"A lawyer. Maître Lechat, who lives in the Boulevard des Batignolles."

"Did she seem to know him?"

"No. She told him she wanted to consult him on a very important matter, but she was in bed and could not leave it. She asked him to come to the Rue Lhomond as quickly as he could. He made her repeat her name three or four times. He didn't seem overpleased at the thought of going all the way across Paris without knowing why. He tried to get the secret out of her, but she refused to say anything more."

"Did they make an appointment?"

"He finally promised to come and see her later in the morning."

Mademoiselle Clément came back, her shopping-bag in her hand, and even before seeing her, Maigret, as he hung up, could hear her breathing, panting slightly. It seemed to the chief-inspector that she was hoping to avoid him, rushing towards the kitchen with a speed unusual for her.

"What's up with her?" he asked Lucas.

"I don't know. She seems quite overcome..."

Maigret went into the kitchen, where she was busy putting her vegetables away in the larder.

She turned her back to him, purposely avoiding having to face him. Her ears were pink; her breathing, harder than usual, made her full bosom heave.

"What is it, Mademoiselle Clément?"

"What?"

“Do you not wish to see me any more?”

She turned round suddenly, her cheeks crimson, her eyes shining.

“What are you trying to hide from me?”

“Me?”

Maigret’s eyes laughed.

“*What did he ask you to do?*”

“Did you follow me?”

“Tell me how he accosted you and repeat exactly what he said to you.”

“That he was a journalist...”

“Did he look like a journalist?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. I don’t know many journalists, but...”

“But?”

“His hair was almost white.”

“Tall, short?”

“Short. Much shorter than me.”

“Well dressed?”

“Respectably dressed, yes. I had stopped at a barrow and was buying radishes. He took off his hat and greeted me.”

“What sort of a hat?”

“A grey felt hat. He was entirely dressed in grey.”

“Did he ask you what I was doing?”

“Not exactly. He explained to me that he represented a newspaper and would like to know where you were carrying on your investigations.”

“What did you reply?”

“I looked around for you or your inspector.”

“Were you frightened?”

“I don’t know. He looked at me in such a determined way. He is very thin, with rings round his eyes and a yellow complexion.”

“ ‘Why don’t you ask Chief-Inspector Maigret yourself?’ I replied.

“ ‘Because he wouldn’t answer me. Is he still at your place?’

“ ‘Yes.’

“ ‘Has he been into the house opposite?’

“Then I mumbled to him that I didn’t know. I was beginning to get frightened. I knew he couldn’t very well do anything in the crowd, but, all the same, I hurried into the delicatessen. He almost came in on my heels. I saw him hesitate. He looked from one side of the street to the other, worried, then he disappeared in the direction of the Boulevard Saint-Germain.”

“Are you sure you didn’t disclose the fact that I had twice been to see Madame Boursicault?”

“Quite sure.”

“And that you didn’t speak to him about her?”

“I didn’t even know her name until you just mentioned it.”

“Whose name?”

“The invalid, on the first floor. She’s the one you mean, isn’t she? And he was the man who fired the shot?”

“There’s quite a chance.”

The fat girl looked at him for a moment, her eyes wide open, then, out of nervousness, began laughing and could not stop.

Chapter VIII

« ^ »

In after years, this became one of the cases Lucas always enjoyed telling, to such an extent in fact that at Headquarters they knew many of his sentences off by heart.

“I was still sitting at the window in the little living-room. The sky suddenly became overcast, as if it were Good Friday, and hailstones started falling, as big as walnuts, bouncing on the road. I remembered that I’d left my window open at Headquarters. I decided to ring up Joseph, the porter, and get him to shut it for me.

“The chief-inspector was walking up and down the passage, his pipe in his mouth, hands behind his back, and as I went past him, I thought he hadn’t seen me.

“But just as I was lifting the receiver off the hook, under the stairs, he took it from my hands, put it back in its place, still as if his mind were on something else, and said:

“ ‘Not now, son!’ ”

In Lucas’s account Maigret frequently called him “son”, although there was hardly ten years’ difference in their ages.

“The hailstorm had lasted for almost an hour, and they spoke of it in the papers as one of the most violent ever recorded; there was damage amounting to millions of francs’ worth round Argenteuil. The chief-inspector had left the door open. During the whole time, he kept walking from the doorway to the end of the passage.

“Mademoiselle Clément was in the kitchen, watching him through the spy-window. She came and spoke to me in a low voice, and she was worried.

“ ‘I wonder what’s wrong with him. It frightens me!’

“And then the phone finally rang.”

At this point in his story, Lucas never failed to pause, then added in a dull voice:

“He raised his head, picked up the receiver and sighed with relief.”

It was true it had hailed that morning, that Maigret paced up and down the passage for a long time, grumbling to himself, and had then rushed to the phone as soon as it started ringing. He said:

“Hallo! Maigret here.”

And a voice at the other end, a voice that seemed far away, spoke like an echo:

“Hallo!”

Then there was a silence. Hailstones bounced from the threshold into the passage. Mademoiselle Clément, holding an oven-pan in her hands in the kitchen, stood stock-still, her movements suspended as if she were the subject of a photograph.

“Do you know who’s telephoning?” the voice finally said.

“Yes.”

“Who?”

“The person who shot Inspector Janvier.”

“But you don’t know my name?”

“I shall know it sooner or later.”

“How?”

“We’ve already got to the Place Clichy.”

There was another silence.

“What did she tell you?”

“Nothing. She’s put the green plant out on the window-sill.”

Another silence. The man must have been telephoning from a bar and had left the door open, because he could hear the noise of the hailstorm at the other end of the line.

“I can get across the frontier before I’m identified.”

“That’s possible. But I don’t think you will.”

“Why not?”

“You know quite well why not.”

Maigret rested his unlit pipe on the telephone and kept his eyes on the money-box and its little notice.

“Are you going to arrest her?”

“I may be forced to.”

“Do the papers know you’ve been to see her?”

“Not yet.”

“Nobody?”

“Only the concierge.”

Maigret could hear a sigh. He did nothing to encourage the man to speak. Each of them was taking his time.

“What did you find out about me?”

“That you are short, middle-aged, grey-haired, that you wear a grey suit, a grey overcoat and a grey hat.”

“Did Mademoiselle Clément tell you this?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve still got time to change my clothes, go to the aerodrome, and take a plane out of the country.”

“I’m not stopping you.”

“You admit that I can get away?”

“Yes.”

“If I gave myself up, would you agree to leave this person we know out of it?”

“That’s an eventuality I have already considered.”

“But you won’t promise anything?”

“Not before I have the details.”

“What details?”

“Of what happened twenty years ago.”

“Only those?”

“Yes.”

“You won’t bring her into the business of the inspector?”

It was Maigret’s turn not to answer, and the silence seemed to last an eternity.

“No,” he said, finally.

“Would you let me go and see her before you take me prisoner?”

Mademoiselle Clément was still motionless in her kitchen, pan in hand, and Lucas, in his armchair, seemed to be holding his breath.

“On one condition.”

“What?”

“That you do not attempt to put an end either to yourself or to her. Even if she asks you to.”

There was silence at the other end this time. The longest so far.

“You insist on this?”

“Yes.”

“So be it.”

“In that case, you may come along here. I presume you aren’t far from the Rue Lhomond.”

“A few yards.”

“I shall stay at my window during your visit. You will not close the curtains or pull down the blind.”

“I promise.”

“When you leave the house, there will be a small black car a little farther along the street. You can just join me there.”

A silence. At last the sound of the receiver being replaced on its hook.

Maigret delayed long enough to relight his pipe, walked to the living-room door and looked vaguely in Lucas’s direction.

“Will you telephone the Quai and ask for a car. Have them stop just a little way down the street.”

“Shall I wait for you there?”

“It’s not worth it.”

“You don’t need me any longer?”

“No.”

“May I stay all the same?”

Had Maigret really said: “If you like”?

He was never positive about it, but Lucas took the permission as granted, and it was thanks to this that he was able to tell his story from then on almost to the end.

While Lucas went off to telephone, Maigret took a bottle of beer from behind the cellar door, not glancing at Mademoiselle Clément, who he didn’t seem to realize was there. Then he set off up the stairs, climbed slowly, glanced into Mademoiselle Blanche’s room and saw her stretched out on her bed, in her dressing-gown, reading the paper.

A few moments later he was leaning on the window-sill; the window was open and it had stopped hailing, as if by magic. Madame Boursicault was in her bed, hands behind her head, staring at the ceiling, motionless like someone who is aware he is being watched.

The sky was brighter, but the sun had not yet come out, the light had the hardness of certain electric-light bulbs with frosted glass. There were hailstones scattered all along the pavement.

The man was coming now from the foot of the street, quite simply, quite naturally, like any passer-by. He was small and thin, dressed in grey; even his face had a greyish look. He might be either old and well preserved, or a young man, prematurely aged.

His clothes were well cut, and altogether he looked rather elegant.

When he was only two or three houses away, he looked up towards the window and saw the chief-inspector watching him. He made no sign. His features did not alter. Without stopping, he went into the house opposite, and it was only on the stairs, or on the landing, that he must have waited, because two or three minutes passed before Maigret saw the woman turn towards the door.

She opened her mouth and must have called:

“Come in.”

She saw him before Maigret did, sat up in her bed, turned almost immediately towards the window and was on the point of rushing over to it.

The man was talking to her as he moved towards her, put his hat on a chair, and he remained calm, in control of himself, with the air of reassuring a frightened child.

Without once turning in Maigret’s direction, he sat down on the edge of the bed, and Françoise Boursicault pressed herself against him, her head in the hollow of his shoulder, while he stroked her forehead with one hand.

In that position she was able to see the chief-inspector, and he, in embarrassment, drew back, opened the beer which he drank from the bottle, because he had forgotten to bring up a glass and the tooth-mug was of a not very appetising colour.

He went out on to the landing. Mademoiselle Blanche was surprised to see him come into her room—she thought, actually, that he was not displeased to see her in her dishabille—and particularly to find him talking to her at length, of everything and nothing, of the book she was reading, and the recent hailstorm.

He heard the telephone ring; below, Lucas’s voice answered, then came his rapid steps on the stairs.

“It’s for you, chief... They’re phoning from the Quai... They’re on to something...”

Lucas was equally astonished to find the chief-inspector in the girl’s room; he was even more so, when Maigret received the news he had brought without surprise, without pleasure.

“She lived in the Rue des Dames for some time, in a little hotel, where a man who...”

“Is Headquarters still holding on?”

“Yes. Lapointe is on the line, very excited. He’d like to give you the details. He’s checked it all with Records. He’s sure...”

“Tell him I’ll see him in my office later.”

In Lucas’s account, these details took on an almost epic quality.

“I must say I thought he was more interested in the pretty girl lying on her bed, making eyes at him, her dressing-gown more than half open...”

Lucas had time to go downstairs and have a talk with Mademoiselle Clément in the kitchen. She was agitated too, strangely worried.

“What’s he up to? What’s going on?”

Maigret did not leave Mademoiselle Blanche’s room until there was nothing more to see, over the way, except a woman lying down with her face turned towards him, and on her cheeks, he could tell, the shiny trickle of tears.

He took the trouble to go in to have a few words with Mademoiselle Clément, and she noticed the suitcase he was carrying.

“Are you going for good?”

“I’ll be back to see you again.”

“The case is over? You’ve found him?”

He didn’t reply directly.

“I want to thank you for your kindness and all you’ve done for me.”

And, as he looked around him, at the surroundings he had come to know so well, she started to laugh, her throaty laugh which shook her big bosom.

“How funny! It’s really quite a moment. I was so used to having you around I was beginning to look on you as one of

my lodgers.”

Perhaps to give her pleasure, he murmured:

“So was I...”

Then, to Lucas:

“I’ll meet you at the Quai in a short while.”

Mademoiselle Clément accompanied him to the threshold and waited there while he crossed the road. The small black car from the Prefecture was waiting a little farther down, two houses beyond the Auvergnat’s bistro.

Maigret hesitated, went up to the counter.

“Are you leaving?”

“One last white wine, yes.”

He drank it, and after that it was the *patron*’s round. The *patron*’s wife rushed from the kitchen and wanted to drink his health too. Like Mademoiselle Clément, she said:

“I had grown used to your coming here...”

And, as he had done over the road, he replied gravely:

“So had I.”

They watched him go off; the fat girl was still on her doorstep. He opened the car door, pushed his case inside first, murmuring:

“May I?”

Well ensconced in the seat, he said at last to the Headquarters driver:

“To the Quai!”

The little grey man was sitting beside him; politely, he took off his hat and held it on his knees during the journey.

The two men did not exchange a single word.

Chapter IX

The two men slowly climbed the dusty staircase, and Maigret sniffed with pleasure the familiar smell. As always, there were people waiting in the glassed-in waiting-room. Joseph, the elderly porter, called happily:

“Good day, Chief-Inspector.”

“Good day, Joseph.”

“The chief wants you to go in and see him.”

“I will in a minute.”

“Monsieur Lapointe also asked me to let him know when you got back.”

“I know.”

“Monsieur Torrence telephoned.”

“Thank you, Joseph.”

He was gently settling back into the daily routine, opened the door into his office, which seemed to reproach him for his desertion.

“Come in!”

He opened the window, took off his hat, his overcoat.

“Make yourself comfortable. Sit down.”

At once, the internal telephone began ringing. It was Lapointe.

“I’ve got his name and his entire history, Chief. Do you want me to come along with the dossier?”

“In a minute. I’ll give you a ring.”

Poor Lapointe! He sighed, offended:

“All right!”

In front of him, the man sat down in a chair, having pulled up his trousers to avoid spoiling the creases. He was obviously fussy about his personal appearance. He was close shaven. His nails were well cared for. He had a look of extreme weariness.

“Have you lived abroad?”

“What makes you think that?”

It was difficult to say exactly. There was something indefinable. Something about his complexion, his look, that sort of premature ageing, for Maigret had come to the conclusion that his interlocutor was not much over forty-five.

“You’re younger than her, aren’t you?”

They were just two people talking in an office and they could have been calmly discussing business together; there was nothing to suggest that one of them would shortly cease to be an ordinary citizen.

“Do you smoke?”

“No, thank you. I haven’t smoked for many years now.”

“And you don’t drink either?”

They were getting to know one another, little by little, casting furtive glances which did not yet come to rest on each other for long.

“I don’t drink any more, no.”

“You once drank a lot?”

“Once upon a time.”

“One of my inspectors is waiting to show me your case-history.”

Strangely enough, the man did not think for a moment that he might be bluffing. He said simply:

“It was inevitable sooner or later.”

“Were you expecting it to happen?”

“I knew it would.”

“So you are almost relieved? No?”

“Perhaps. As long as she is not dragged into it. It wasn’t her fault. Don’t forget your promise.”

It was the only moment he showed a trace of anxiety. He was calm; it even seemed that, as the interview proceeded in

the quiet of the office, he relaxed more and more, as if it were something he had not been able to do for many years.

“As far as I am concerned, I am ready to pay for what I’ve done.”

He added with a timid smile:

“I suppose that will come to quite a lot?”

“Probably, yes.”

“My neck?”

Maigret made a vague gesture.

“It is difficult to know in advance what a jury’s reaction will be. It might possibly be less if...”

The man said, in a dry voice, with a touch of anger:

“No!”

“It’s up to you. How old were you when you met her?”

“Twenty. I had just been up before the medical board and been discharged.”

“Born in Paris?”

“In the Nièvre.”

“Parents well off?”

“Middling. Not too much money.”

“Did you study?”

“Three years at college.”

About the same age as Paulus. That one had also come to Paris with the idea of making a go of it.

“Did you work?”

“I have worked.”

“Doing what?”

“In an office... I was badly paid...”

Just like Paulus, again.

“So you started hanging around bars?”

“I was alone in Paris. I hated my room.”

“You met Françoise in a bar?”

“Yes. She was four years older than I.”

“She had a lover?”

“Yes.”

“Was it because of you that she left him?”

“Yes.”

“Did you live together?”

“I couldn’t, because I had no money. I had just left my last job. I was looking for another.”

“Did you love her?”

“I thought so. But I wasn’t sure then.”

He had pronounced those last words gravely, slowly, staring at the floor.

“Would you prefer me to have your file brought here?”

“It’s not worth it. My name was Julien Foucrier. Françoise’s previous friend had had his pockets well lined. It made me furious not to be able to buy things for her.”

“Did she complain?”

“No. She said we had all our lives ahead of us and that I’d make it in the end.”

“But you didn’t have the patience?”

“That’s right.”

“Whom did you kill?”

“I didn’t want to kill anybody. Opposite the hotel where I was living, in the Rue des Dames, behind the Boulevard des Batignolles, there lived a man of about sixty, whom my landlady had pointed out to me.”

“Why?”

“Because I was always late with my rent. She told me that he lent money to people in my situation and that it would be

better if I owed it to him rather than her. I went to see him. He lent me some twice, at a hundred per cent interest. He lived alone in a dingy flat which he looked after himself. He was called Mabilie.”

Maigret did not mention that he could vaguely recall that case.

“Did you kill him?”

“Yes. I had gone to him a third time to ask for another loan, and he had opened the safe. There were two candlesticks on the chimney-piece. I grabbed hold of one of them.”

“What did you do afterwards?”

“The police wasted nearly a month’s time. The thing was that, a little after my visit, somebody else went up to see Mabilie, a man who had a criminal record, and it was his description the concierge gave them. He was arrested. They thought for a long time that he was guilty.”

“Have you told Françoise the truth?”

“No. I was living in a dream. When I read in the papers that the man who had been arrested instead of me had been released, I lost my head and went abroad.”

“All this without a word to Françoise?”

“I wrote to her that I had been summoned by my family and that I would soon be back.”

“Where did you go?”

“To Spain. Then to Portugal, from where I left for Panama. The French papers published my name and my description. In Portugal, I succeeded in getting hold of a fake passport in the name of Vermersch.”

“And you’ve lived under that name ever since?”

“Yes.”

“Did you stay long in Panama?”

“Eighteen years.”

“Without ever hearing from Françoise?”

“How could I have heard from her?”

“You didn’t write to her?”

“Never. I began by working as a waiter in a French hotel. Later I started a restaurant of my own.”

“And you made a fortune?”

He replied, as if ashamed:

“I made some money. Enough to live without any worries. Then I fell ill. My liver. I had been drinking a lot. Over there you can buy absinthe easily, and the real thing, too. I acquired a taste for it. I spent three months in hospital and the doctors advised a change of climate.”

“How long have you been back in France?”

“Seven years.”

“That must have been before Françoise fell ill herself?”

“Yes. Two years before.”

“How did you find her again?”

“I didn’t look for her. I would not have dared. I was convinced she would refuse to see me. It was only by chance that I met her one day, in the Métro.”

“Where were you living?”

“Where I still live now, in the Boulevard Richard-Lenoir.”

He smiled for the second time ; if you could call it a smile.

“A few houses along from you, on the corner of the Rue du Chemin-Vert.”

“Françoise told you she was married?”

“That’s right.”

“She didn’t bear you any grudge?”

“No. She said it was on her account that it had all happened in the first place.”

“She was still in love with you?”

“I think so.”

“And you?”

“I had never stopped loving her.”

He did not raise his voice once, spoke very simply, in a neutral tone, and the sun, still young, damp, began to break through the clouds.

“You didn’t ask her to leave her husband?”

“She didn’t feel she could do such a thing. He’s a very fine man, you see, and she respects him.”

“You saw a lot of each other, the two of you?”

“We met two or three times a week, when her husband was at sea, in a café in the Boulevard Sébastopol. Then I wanted to see the place where she lived. Not for the reason you’re thinking. We never considered that. I went to her flat one day while the concierge was out shopping and I left again almost at once.”

“It became a habit?”

“It happened several times.”

“You had already worked out a signal?”

“The copper pot! Yes. I knew I would get caught sooner or later. It was inevitable.”

“You never suggested that she should go abroad with you?”

“She wouldn’t have agreed.”

“Because of Boursicault?”

“Yes. You don’t know what she’s like.”

“She then became completely bed-ridden?”

“Almost. You’ve seen her. It’s the worst thing in the world to happen to anybody. She was unable to go out. I began going to her place more often. One morning, when the concierge came back, I was still in the flat, so I hid. I stayed until the next morning.”

“From then on, you repeated your visits?”

“Yes. It gave us something of the feeling that we were a married couple. Don’t forget we had never lived together. When I was in the Rue des Dames, she still kept on her room in the Boulevard Rochechouart. It’s thanks to that that she was never involved. That was the start of this story! I began by staying two days, then three, sometimes more. Eventually we arranged quite a system, since there was the question of food. I brought mine with me.”

“Of course you ran no risk of the husband’s returning unexpectedly, since boats follow a strict time-schedule.”

“The hardest part was during his month’s leave.”

Everything about it was grey and melancholy, like the man himself, like the flat in the Rue Lhomond, like the woman who spent all her days lying in bed.

“Last week, I saw from the window that the street was being watched.”

“And you thought it was for you?”

“The papers hadn’t mentioned Paulus. I had no reason to suspect that it was the house opposite the police were interested in. I thought automatically that they had got on to my trail. They were probably not sure, or supposed that I was outside and were waiting for me to return. For two days I imagined every possible solution. A dozen times, I was on the point of giving myself up, but then I would have to mention Françoise and she would have been questioned, possibly arrested, her husband would have found out...”

“In fact,” said Maigret as he filled his cold pipe, “you shot the inspector so that you could leave the house.”

“Yes.”

“Because the husband would have come home and found you there?”

“That’s it. For three days I waited in vain for a break in the watch being kept. I saw the inspectors relieving each other. When they moved into Mademoiselle Clément’s, I was convinced it was to spy on the flat where I was. I waited till

the last possible moment, so to speak. Boursicault was on his train. He would arrive a little after midnight.

“It was absolutely necessary for me to leave, don’t you see?”

“Did you have a gun?”

“I have never carried a gun in my life, even in Panama. I knew that Boursicault’s revolver was in the bedside table. I had often seen it there. It was a large Colt he had kept since the first war and left within reach of his wife because he imagined she was nervous.”

“You fired from the window?”

“I waited until the inspector lit a cigarette, which he did every few minutes, so that I could aim better.”

“Did Françoise know what you were doing?”

“No. She didn’t even notice that I had a revolver in my hand, since we were in the dark.”

“You were careful not to leave straight away?”

“I waited until there were enough people moving about in the street for me to slip through unnoticed. When I left the house the concierge was on the opposite pavement, with the neighbours, facing the other way. She had left the door open.”

“Françoise knew that you had fired the shot?”

“How could she not know? I promised her I would leave the country.”

“When did you telephone her?”

“The next day. She begged me again to get away.”

“Why didn’t you?”

He didn’t answer. Then he murmured, raising his eyes towards the chief-inspector:

“What would have been the use?”

Not unlike Paulus, who had stayed hiding in Mademoiselle Clément’s house. He had also left once and then returned.

“You knew you would be caught?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“You don’t care?”

“As long as she is not worried. She’s got nothing to do with it. She had nothing to do with what happened in the Rue des Dames either. It’s my fault, my fault alone. It was inevitable.”

That idiot Paulus, in his cell, must be thinking the same thing.

“I am sorry, now, that I shot the inspector. I was relieved to read in the papers that he hadn’t died. Particularly when I saw that he had two children and that his wife was expecting a third.”

They were silent for a moment, and a sunbeam came to rest on the window, but was almost immediately effaced by a cloud.

“Don’t forget your promise...”

Maigret frowned as he remembered the lawyer Françoise Boursicault had called, stretched his hand towards the telephone, but changed his mind.

“Did she tell you she had telephoned a lawyer?”

“Yes. She won’t tell him anything.”

Nonetheless Maigret did pick up the receiver.

“Get me the Brasserie Dauphine... Hallo!... Justin?... Maigret here...” And, to his companion: “A glass of beer?”

“A cup of coffee.”

“Bring over two beers for me and a cup of coffee.”

He got up, went and stood in front of the window. The bell rang.

“Right, Chief. In a second...”

He turned towards the man who was quietly sitting in his chair.

“Do you have a lawyer?”

“I’ll take the first one that comes. In my position...!”

Maigret began smoking and a few seconds later he opened the door for the waiter from the restaurant, told him to put the tray on his desk.

He drank the first glass in one gulp, wiped his mouth.

“I suppose I can leave you alone for a second?”

“You can.”

He went to see the chief.

“They tell me the case is wound up, Maigret?”

“It is. The man’s in my office.”

“He admits it?”

“He admits it. He had tried to burgle the house opposite Mademoiselle Clément’s, and when he came out he saw there was an inspector in the street...”

“Is that really true?”

“No. But, as far as I’m concerned, I shall act as if it were.”

“A woman?”

“Yes.”

“Pretty?”

“No. She’s almost fifty and she’s been bedridden for five years.”

“There’ll be no snags?”

“I don’t think so.”

“By the way, Maigret, I’d like you to see someone who has been hanging around the waiting-room for three days, and he’s feeling a bit low.”

“Who?”

“Paulus’s father. He insists on seeing you, to explain...”

“I’ll see him,” sighed Maigret. “How is Janvier?”

“They took him home this morning. Your wife?”

“She’s coming back tonight. I’ll be meeting her at the station.”

He walked through the duty room, where young Lapointe jumped up, very excited, and held out a thick file.

“It was sheer luck, Chief! We’ve found...”

“I know, lad. You did well.”

He took the file and put it under his arm as if it were of no importance.

“You know he’s already killed somebody?”

“Yes.”

“It’s true that you’ve arrested him? Lucas says...”

Maigret stood in the doorway, his pipe between his teeth, and Lapointe was not certain that he properly understood what he mumbled as he went out.

“We had to!”

He turned towards Vacher, who was also there, busy drawing up a report.

“What did he say?”

“That he had to.”

“Had to what?”

“Arrest him, I suppose.”

And young Lapointe, staring at the door through which Maigret had disappeared, said simply.

“Ah!”

*“Shadow Rock Farm”
Lakeville (Connecticut)
February 21, 1951*

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[scanned anonymously in a galaxy far far away]

[for a complete bibliography of all 103 episodes of *The Maigret Saga*, check out [Steve Trussel's amazing fan site](http://www.trussel.com/f_maig.htm) at http://www.trussel.com/f_maig.htm]

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